BAKEMONOGATARI
MONSTER TALE PART 02
NISIOISIN
TRANSLATED BY
KO RANSOM

The name Suruga Kanbaru belongs to a celebrity known the entire school over, which of course means that I too heard it my fair share of times. My classmates Tsubasa Hanekawa and Hitagi Senjogahara may be no less celebrated, but that's strictly among third-years. Yes, despite being a year below me, Tsubasa Hanekawa, and Hitagi Senjogahara and thus a second-year, Suruga Kanbaru's renown is so extraordinary that it reaches the ears of a senior like me who's fairly estranged from those kinds of rumors. That's not normally supposed to happen. You can act like a grandee and chortle that she's sure impressive for someone so young, but in her case, the statement would be uncomfortably close to the truth.

Maybe you'd get a better sense of who Suruga Kanbaru is if I said "star" rather than "celebrity." While Tsubasa Hanekawa and Hitagi Senjogahara are seen (despite the latter's true nature) as so-called model students, diligent pupils with good grades and excellent conduct, that's not the image here at all□though, being a "star," it's not as if she's known as a rough-and-tumble ringleader of a gang of bad girls. In contrast to Tsubasa Hanekawa and Hitagi Senjogahara and their primarily academic dominance, her mastery is in the realm of sports. Suruga Kanbaru is our school's ace basketball player. After she joined the club in her first year, she was on the main roster in no time at all, but if that were it, you could reason that an unknown, perennial first-round knockout of a girls' basketball team was a joke anyway. But it would be strange to treat her as anything but a star when she ended up

building a monstrous legend by leading the unknown, perennial first-round knockout of a girls' basketball team, which was a joke anyway, to the national tournament. There's no better way to put it than "ended up building" because you almost wanted to ask what she thought she was doing and scold her, the legend was so abrupt. Our girls' basketball team blew up and was elevated into an honest-to-goodness crack squad that boys' teams from neighboring high schools requested, for real and not in a haw-haw way, to play against, for practice—all thanks to one girl.

She isn't unusually tall or anything.

She's built like the average high school girl, too.

If anything, she's a little on the small and slender side.

The term "dainty" would suit her well.

But Suruga Kanbaru—can jump.

Just once, a year ago, for some reason or other, I had a chance to take a peek at a game Suruga Kanbaru was playing in—and she was so quick and agile that she didn't just pass by the other team's defenders but threaded them, and like in the sports manga that once swept Japan, scored with a clean dunk—one dunk after dunk, dozens of them, as if it were the most pleasant activity, with comfort, with ease, with the refreshing smile of an athletic girl never leaving her face. When girls' basketball teams make most of their shots using both hands, how many high schoolers can expect to witness a dunk of all things? From my position in the crowd, more than being overwhelmed by her, I felt awful for the players on the opposing team as they visibly lost their will to play, overwhelmed by her, and couldn't watch anymore, it was so painful, and had to leave. I remember it like it was yesterday.

In any case, while my high school is an academically oriented prep

school, it's still a high school, full of sensitive mid-teen youths, so flashy sports heroes getting showered with more attention than evident model students who merely excel at their studies is a natural outcome—and Suruga Kanbaru doing this or that in response to whatever, every detail of her behavior that hardly seems to matter and hardly does, turns into gossip and courses through the school. I'd have enough for a book if I collected all of it. Even if I'm not interested and actively try to avoid it, information about Suruga Kanbaru reaches me anyway. If you go to our school, regardless of your year, whether she is ahead or behind you, anyone who cares to can find out, on a given day, what she ordered at the cafeteria. It's easy, you just ask someone nearby.

But rumors are rumors.

Half-serious.

They aren't necessarily true.

In fact, a lot of the rumors that make it all the way to me lack credibility and are difficult to take at face value—or rather, it's not rare for two perfectly opposed rumors to be making their rounds at the same time. She's irritable, no, she's gentle; she cares about her friends, no, she's cold; she's modest, no, she's arrogant; she goes from one wild romance to the next, no, she's never dated a boy before—anyone who actually satisfied those conditions would be a broken person. Someone like me who has seen her but never spoken to her, who probably has never come within fifteen feet of her, has to leave it to the imagination on those points. But as a practical matter, there's altogether no need for me to exercise my imagination, altogether none—we're in different years, after all, and there's no way a sports star and ace basketball player (since club activities are only for first- and second-years at my

school, I feel I can at least go ahead and trust the rumor that she's been made captain) is going to have anything to do with a washout third-year like me.

We don't have the first thing to do with each other.

Naturally, she must have no idea who I am.

There ought to be no reason for her to know.

That's how I saw it.

That was my assumption.

I learned that I was mistaken as May was drawing to a close, when we'd be changing to our summer uniforms come June. By then, my hair had grown out to where it nearly hid the two small holes gouged at the bottom of my neck, and I felt relieved that wearing a band-aid for a couple of weeks should do it… Ten or so days had passed since Hitagi Senjogahara and I started seeing each other, as they say, following a chance encounter.

Already at that point, when Suruga Kanbaru approached me with ringing footsteps and spoke to me, her left hand was wrapped tight in a white bandage

“Ah…Mister Ah-ah-ah-gi.”

“It’s Araragi.”

“I’m sorry. A slip of the tongue.”

As I biked down a slope getting home from school on a Friday, ahead of me I saw a little girl with pigtails carrying a backpack, namely Mayoi Hachikuji, so I hit my brakes, came to a stop to her left, and called out to her, at which she blinked and acted surprised and mispronounced my name like always.

While a small part of me was touched that my name could still be mangled in a new way, I, ever conscientious, corrected her.

“Don’t be turning me into some sidekick who takes his name from his cluelessness.”

“I think it sounded quite cute.”

“I sounded like a total loser.”

“Hmm. Well, I think that might be surprisingly fitting.” The fifth grader could let some mean words slip out of her mouth. “In any case, I’m glad to see that you’re doing well, Mister Araragi. I’m delighted that we’re able to meet like this again. How have you been? Has anything in particular happened since then?”

“Huh? Oh, no, not really. That kind of thing isn’t common. I’ve been living in peace. Peace, or maybe quiet. Oh, but I do have my skills test coming up soon, and there hasn’t been much peace or quiet in my life when it comes to that.”

About two weeks earlier□May fourteenth, Mother’s Day.

I met her, Mayoi Hachikuji, in a park that day, and found myself getting wrapped up in a bit of a case as a result… Well, what happened wasn't concrete enough to be called a case, nor general enough to highlight or spotlight, but at any rate, I was involved in *an experience that wasn't quite normal.*

When I say it wasn't normal, I mean it wasn't normal.

But we were able to solve it in the end thanks to the help of an unpleasant dude, namely Oshino, and Senjogahara□and everything was fine, but if what happened on May fourteenth was fate and not a fluke, then spending every day of the following two weeks in peace and quiet must have also been fate and not a fluke.

As far as I could tell, Hachikuji was doing okay too□which seemed to mean that the Mother's Day incident had come to an amicable end. This was rare since the experience wasn't a normal one. In that regard, for me□and Hanekawa□and Senjogahara□what came after our not-quite-normal experiences, their aftermath, was actually tougher to deal with□or much crueler. More miserable, even.

Mayoi Hachikuji.

In that regard, I envied her.

"Oh, is something the matter? How indecent of you, Mister Araragi, to stare at me with such passionate eyes."

"…What passionate eyes?" And indecent? This was some low passion.

"Stare at me with such eyes a second more and you'll make me go *hic.*"

“What’s wrong with your diaphragm?”

Eek, maybe.

Well, considering her circumstances, it wouldn’t be right simply to feel envious of her…because in a way it’s Hachikuji who has it the toughest and cruelest, neither me nor Hanekawa nor Senjogahara. I’m sure many people would be inclined to take that view.

As I mused, two high school students passed to the left of my bike. Both of them were girls. They were wearing uniforms from a different school than mine. The pair looked at Hachikuji and me with clear suspicion, and unsubtly hushing their voices, whispered as they passed by, in an extremely grating display… I suppose high school senior Koyomi Araragi engaging in earnest conversation with fifth grader Mayoi Hachikuji appeared very dodgy to ordinary sensibilities.

Fine.

The cold gaze of society didn’t bother me.

I hadn’t accosted Hachikuji without the necessary resolve. Why, all that really mattered was that she and I understood the truth. Shallow prejudice was powerless against the friendship that she and I had forged.

“Oh dear, Mister Araragi, it seems those two figured out that you’re a pedophile. My deepest condolences.”

“Don’t you be saying that!”

“There’s no need to be embarrassed. Being fond of little girls isn’t, in and of itself, against the law. Your preferences and predilections are your own. It’s just that you mustn’t practice your abnormal philosophy.”

“You know, even if I did like little girls, I’d hate you!”

We hadn’t forged any friendship.

I seemed to be surrounded by people like her.

I glanced behind me.

We were alone now.

For the time being.

“…You’re a scarily promising kid, you know that? But Hachikuji, what’re you doing here wandering around at this hour? Did you get lost on your way somewhere again?”

“Isn’t that quite the rude way to put it, Mister Araragi. I’ve never been lost since the day I was born.”

“That’s an impressive memory you got there.”

“You’re making me blush with your compliments.”

“No, it really is impressive. Being able to forget all the stupid, inconvenient stuff.”

“Oh, not at all. By the way, who are you again?”

“I’ve been forgotten!”

It was a pretty neat riposte.

She had good taste.

“…Really, though, even if it’s a joke, it’s depressing to be forgotten by someone, Hachikuji.”

“I forget all the stupid, inconvenient people.”

“Hey, I’m not so stupid that you can call me that! And I said stuff, not people!”

“I forget all the stupid, inconvenient...stuff.”

“Good, good, that’s…not right! It’s not right at all! You shouldn’t go around calling people ‘stuff’!”

“But you said to, yourself.”

“Be quiet. No playing gotcha.”

“You’re very self-centered, aren’t you, Mister Araragi? Very well, then. I’ll be considerate and put it another way.”

“Let’s hear it…”

“Stupid, convenient people.”

“……”

It was a fun conversation.

To be honest, I did have some reservations about myself, this high schooler named Koyomi Araragi who chatted with a fifth grader like we were peers, but it did feel pretty similar to talking to my sisters, who were in middle school, so… Plus, maybe it was the difference between elementary and middle school girls, but Hachikuji wasn’t strangely touchy or oddly cynical, and our conversation had a better flow to it than when I talked to my little sisters.

“Haa…”

With a sigh, I got off my bicycle.

Pushing its handlebars, I began walking forward.

Talking with Hachikuji was fun, but standing around and running on for too long could have an adverse effect on my later plans. Not that I was particularly pressed for time, but I still decided to push along my bike as we spoke. Better to walk and talk than stand and talk. Hachikuji must have been wandering around without a specific destination because she strolled alongside my bike without a word or gesture from me. I bet she just had nothing to do.

There was another reason that I chose to get going□I glanced behind again, but it looked like I didn’t need to worry on that account

for the time being.

“Where are you headed, Mister Araragi?”

“Mm. Home, for now.”

“For now? So will you be going out after that?”

“Yeah, I guess□remember what I just told you about the skills test being soon?”

“Your skills, which is to say your very worth, will be facing a moment of truth?”

“It’s nothing that big… The moment of truth is simply whether or not I’ll graduate.”

“Is that so. The moment of truth of whether you’ll not graduate.”

“……”

It meant the same thing, but the nuance was so different.

Such a tricky affair, this language thing.

“Mister Araragi, you are, after all, a convenient person mentally.”

“I’d honestly be happier if you just said I was stupid.”

“No, I’d never. There are some things that are better off taken for granted.”

“But not better off left unsaid, I see!”

“Oh, um, don’t worry. I don’t have the best grades either, so we’re in the same boat, the same boat, okay?”

“……”

I was being comforted by an elementary schooler.

In the same boat as an elementary schooler.

Not only that, when it came to herself, she wasn’t stupid but merely didn’t have “the best grades.” Mayoi Hachikuji was slyly deceptive.

“Well, it actually hits close to home for me,” I said. “I’m seriously

going to be in a bad spot if I bungle this skills test."

"Will you be expelled?"

"No matter how preppy of a prep school it is, I'm not going to be expelled over a low test score. I mean, any prep school where I would sounds like a setup to a joke. So the worst that can happen is that I'll have to repeat a grade, but… But I do want to avoid that."

If I could.

No, not if I could. I had to.

"Hm. In that case, Mister Araragi, are you really in a position to be going out again today? You should hurry and lock yourself in at home and study for your test."

"Surprisingly solid advice, Hachikuji."

"'Solid advice'? That's two words too many, sir!"

"But 'surprisingly' was fine?!"

What a born entertainer.

"Well, there's no need for you to worry, Hachikuji, if anything you've hit the nail on the head. I don't need to be told. You see, I may be going out, but it's not to play or to shop. I'm going out to study."

"Hrm?" Hachikuji tilted her head like a grownup. "So you're saying you're going to study at the library or something? Hmm. I personally think that the best environment for studying is a familiar one where you can relax, like your own room… Oh, or will you be going to a cram school or something?"

"If I had to say, cram school would be closer to the mark," I answered. "You remember Senjogahara, don't you? Well, she gets some of the top grades in our whole year, and she promised to coach me at her place today."

“Miss Senjogahara…”

Hachikuji folded her arms and faced down.

Wait, had she forgotten? Not because it was inconvenient, but possibly out of fear?

“Her full name is Hitagi Senjogahara,” I tried to remind her. “You know, the lady with the ponytail who was with me the other day, who helped□”

“Oh, that *tsundere*?”

“……”

She did remember.

It appeared as though Senjogahara was being granted the “t□□e” title all around town… Was she okay with that? I needed to ask her how that made her feel, just so I’d know how to react, on my part.

“She was an endlessly tolerant women, I recall. She carried me on her back the entire time as she showed me the way.”

“Those are some really embellished memories, you know?!”

Senjogahara was functioning like a trauma for Hachikuji. Considering their respective circumstances, that almost made sense…

“Hmm,” murmured Hachikuji, her arms still crossed. “Oh, but…if I’m not mistaken, you and Miss Senjogahara are□well, um, how to put it.”

Hachikuji seemed to be choosing her words with care. I had a good idea what her question was, but I got the impression that she was reluctant to phrase it in a bald way and was searching for a different expression. While I wouldn’t call it curiosity, I was somewhat interested in the selection process her fifth-grade vocabulary would undergo, so I

stood there and watched, offering her no lifeline.

Finally, she said, “You’ve entered into a lovers’ contract, correct?”

“You couldn’t have done worse!”

To no one’s surprise, I found myself yelling at her.

Another textbook interaction between us.

“Excuse me? Did I say something odd, Mister Araragi?”

“On the surface, you didn’t use any funny words, but few people would fail to smell something rotten from their nuance…”

“If the word ‘contract’ is the problem…then what about ‘transaction’? A lovers’ transaction.”

“You did manage to make it worse! Just speak like a normal person, I don’t care!”

“Hmph. All right, as you wish. I’ll speak like a normal person. Normal comes easy to me when I feel like it. Here I go, are you ready? If I’m not mistaken, you are Miss Senjogahara’s gentleman caller.”

“…Um, I guess.”

Now she was coming at me with an awfully musty locution.

That was her idea of normal?

“So this claim that she’ll be coaching you is surely no more than a pretext, and you’ll end up trading caresses?”

“……”

Another musty expression.

Something was definitely off about her vocabulary.

“Mister Araragi, if I may, visiting your lover’s home right before a skills test that will ascertain if you can repeat a grade is nothing short of suicidal.”

“It’ll ascertain if I can graduate.” She seemed to think that I was a

pretty big idiot. You poor thing, I pitied myself. “And don’t be calling it ‘suicidal,’ either.”

“All right, then. It seems like nothing short of suicide.”

I was being bullied by an elementary school kid. You poor thing, I pitied myself. “Watch it,” I warned her, “or I’ll bust you up, sooner or later…”

“Bust me up? Are you talking about my chest? What exactly are you seeking from my elementary-school body?”

“Shut up. Don’t play gotcha when you haven’t even gotten me.”

I bonked Hachikuji on the head.

In return, Hachikuji kicked my shin.

Draw declared, out of mutual respect.

“Well anyway, Hachikuji, no need to worry on that point… Senjogahara is ridiculously strict about these things.”

“She’s strict about studying? How Spartan. Ah, now that you say so, she didn’t seem the type to suffer fools gladly.”

“Yep. She said as much herself.”

That’s why she found children insufferable.

Including Hachikuji.

Maybe she found me insufferable, too.

Though, of course, I wasn’t only talking about studying when I described Senjogahara as “strict”… Well, let’s just agree that she’s a model student.

“So she’s like Gunnery Sergeant Heartful,” Hachikuji said.

“Whoever that is sounds like the friendliest NCO ever.”

“Um, I believe Miss Senjogahara’s home is near that park□”

“No, I think I already told you, but she moved away a while ago—I’ve already been there once, a little before I met you, and it’s pretty far. If I go home, switch bikes, and head over… Ugh, now that I’m looking at the time, I kind of need to hurry.”

“If you’re in a rush, I won’t be so boorish as to keep you.”

“No, I don’t have my back against the wall or anything yet.”

I may have been heading to Senjogahara’s, but it was still to study, and the honest truth was that I couldn’t quite get in the mood…though who knew what acid-tongued abuse Senjogahara would unleash if I told her that.

Oh boy.

Hitagi Senjogahara.

It was true of Hachikuji, too, but Senjogahara was certainly—

“Hey, Hachikuji…are you—”

Just then.

Mid-sentence, I heard a sound from behind me.

A sound.

The sound of footsteps.

A sharp and lively rhythm, less a series of strides than leaps, outright jumps, *tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup*—such footsteps.

There was no need to glance behind me to confirm.

Yeah, I guessed not…

In terms of not being able to enjoy some peace and quiet, I was burdened with another dire threat on top of the skills test…

Just when I thought I’d shaken it.

Tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup.

The footsteps got closer and closer.

There was no need to confirm, but still□

I couldn't help it.

Tupp!

Just as I completed my reluctant, recalcitrant turn□she leapt.

She, Suruga Kanbaru, was leaping through the air.

Across more than just several feet, as though performing a long jump, airborne with an ideal form and trajectory that seemed to ignore the law of universal gravitation□and passing me to my right still airborne, almost at eye level□

She landed.

Her fluttering hair settled when she did.

A school uniform.

This time, needless to say, it was my school's.

Her scarf was colored second-year yellow.

By the way, leaping in her uniform meant that her skirt, modified to be shorter as they are these days, had flown up as well, but since she wore bike shorts that reached to her knees□the pleasure wasn't mine.

Her skirt, too, fell back into place just a moment later.

Suddenly, I noticed a smell like burning rubber.

The source seemed to be intense friction between the asphalt and the soles of her unmistakably expensive sneakers… How exceptionally athletic was she, anyway?

Then our basketball ace, Suruga Kanbaru□turned around.

Though not thoroughly adult, her expression was cool and commanding in a way most third-years couldn't pull off, and her handsome eyes□looked straight at me.

She placed her hand on her chest as if she were about to make a pledge.

Then she flashed a little grin.

“Hello there, my senior Araragi. What a coincidence.”

“I’ve never heard of such a contrived coincidence!”

She’d obviously sprinted in my direction.

When I looked around, Hachikuji was clean gone. Despite being blunt and brusque toward me, Mayoi Hachikuji was a surprisingly bashful kid, and she’d exercised a snap judgment and fleet-footedness to go with it. Of course, just about anyone would flee if a strange woman came dashing at such an unholy speed (it must have looked like Kanbaru was heading straight for her from where she stood).

Still, she really wasn’t much of a friend, was she…

Fine, fine.

When I looked back at Kanbaru, she was nodding over and over again like she was utterly enchanted and profoundly moved for some reason.

“…What’s the matter?”

“No, I was just pondering your words, to engrave them deep in my heart. ‘I’ve never heard of such a contrived coincidence’… The perfect line for the occasion, the kind that everyone hopes to come up with but fails to. That’s what I call a razor wit.”

“……”

“Yes, you’re right,” Kanbaru said. “I did come chasing after you.”

“…Um, yeah. I know.”

“Ah, so you did know. Anything a fledgling like me tries to pull is transparent to someone of your caliber, I take it. This is awkward, and I could not feel more embarrassed, but I am duly impressed.”

“……”

What are you supposed to say to that?

God knows what kind of expression was stuck on my face at that moment, but Suruga Kanbaru paid no mind and brandished her vivid smile at me.

Three days earlier.

As I walked down the hallway, the very same Suruga Kanbaru approached me with resonant footsteps and began talking to me like it was nothing. So much so that I ended up replying normally, but this was the star second-year, a celebrity known the school over, someone whom even I, a third-year estranged from such gossip, knew of—but never dreamed of having anything to do with in any conceivable way—so I was quite surprised.

But what really surprised me was her personality. Well, I don’t know what to call it, but I do know it’s bizarre… Suruga Kanbaru possessed a disposition, a character I’d never encountered in my whole life.

And.

Ever since, meaning from three days ago to this exact day and moment—I’d been followed around by her like this. No matter when, no matter where, no matter who might be watching, *tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup,* Kanbaru was dashing towards me.

“Putting break periods aside,” I asked her, “didn’t you have practice after school? Should you even be here?”

“A-ha. So astute, as I’ve come to expect. You’re like the hero of a detective story who never misses the slightest discrepancy. You’d give Philip Marlowe a run for his money, a barefoot run.”

“A national-tier basketball player shouldn’t be here at this hour, it’s just odd, so enough with the flattery.”

If that was all it took to send the hero of a detective story running to his mommy, then I didn’t want to read that series.

Kanbaru was beaming. “Such modest words of self-admonition, you never fail to value humility as an asset that’s second only to your life… I’m prone to overestimating myself and ought to learn from you, starting right now. Ha ha, they say that one bad apple spoils the whole barrel, but I can feel myself growing as a person just from being with you. Now I know what ‘emulating’ is all about.”

There was no malice in her smile.

…In my life so far, I’d taken “a good person” to mean someone like Hanekawa, but I wondered if the ultimate specimens were actually more like Kanbaru.

In other words, they were even worse than Hanekawa.

Even more of a pain than our class president.

“But see, my hand is like this right now,” Kanbaru said, sticking out her left arm.

Her left arm, wrapped tight in a white bandage. Over every inch, from all five of her fingertips to her wrist. The long sleeves of her school uniform hid the rest of her arm, but the bandage probably extended up to around her elbow. I’d heard that a little while ago, she’d suffered a mishap during a solo workout and given herself a nasty sprain, or something□well, I’d heard that as a rumor, right before Kanbaru talked

to me.

Rumors are rumors.

Suruga Kanbaru with her athletic prowess and flexibility spraining herself, solo workout or not, was hard to take even with a grain of salt□but since her arm was bandaged, I supposed it was the truth. Everyone makes mistakes, to err is human, even monkeys fall from trees.

“Since I can’t play, I’d only get in the team’s way at the gym. That’s why I’m refraining from going to practices now.”

“Still, aren’t you the captain? Even as it is, the team’s morale is sure to drop without you.”

“I’m disappointed to know that you think I’m carrying the whole team on my back. My team isn’t so feckless that their morale would drop just because I’m not around,” Kanbaru said in a tougher tone. “Basketball is a harsh sport. You can’t count on any single person to win the game. Sure, the position and role I play means that I stand out, but it’s only thanks to everyone else. The praise that gets showered on me ought to be shared by the whole team.”

“…Uh, I guess you’re right.”

What was the word for someone like her?

Decent? Virtuous?

What was it.

It seemed that, not just now but in general, Kanbaru was incredibly sensitive to people insulting her teammates (not that I was trying to). When she was a first-year, she flipped a table when the school newspaper was interviewing her because they said something rude about one of her elder comrades□or so one rumor went (if you’re curious, the rumor ended up being false, but something similar did

happen).

Heheh, a laugh escaped Kanbaru's lips. "I know. You were putting my aptitude as a captain to the test, weren't you?"

"……"

What was this second-year saying to me now with such a smug and triumphant look?

Turn that gaze away from me.

"My senior, in recording your words for future generations, the writer better bold and underline them so their impression is imparted to the readers. The weight you invest in each word is overwhelming. 'It's not what you say, but who says it'—they often mean that in a negative sense, but you're the one person who gives it a positive spin. Please, relax. I don't intend to abandon my responsibilities as captain; I'm not so self-absorbed as to be that negligent. I'm aware that I have to live up to being our ace and made sure to issue workout routines. If anything, they're focusing on practice with greater ease thanks to my absence. When the devil's away, the mice will play."

"The devil, huh? Well, I'm relieved to hear it anyway."

"Sport or not, it's just a club activity for students. Moreover, ours is a prep school. At the end of the day, an extracurricular is a way for us teens to have some memories, so fun, free, and friendly does it. Even so, most of my betters wouldn't bother to have anything to do with me, but not only are you looking out for my relationships, you're even thinking of my teammates. I feel bad for making you so concerned. Such depth of character expands my own horizons—to think that you'd even play the villain for the basketball team's sake. Only someone who truly cares about his juniors could go that far. I've never met a person like you

before, sir."

"I've never met a person like you before, either…"

She was breaking new ground…

A natural-born killer with kindness…

"Is that so," she said. "There's no greater honor than to hear that from you. Heheh, what is this feeling, inspiration? It's as though getting praised by someone as gracious as you has opened up a whole new well of courage in me. I feel like I can do anything now. From this day on, whenever I feel down, I'm going to come to you. A few words from my mentor will make me pick myself back up again, I know it."

Kanbaru's smile refused to leave her face even for a moment.

Her expression almost looked unguarded—but it wasn't, due to an undeniable strength that resided at its core. Only someone with absolute confidence in herself could wear such a smile.

We belonged to completely different worlds.

We belonged to completely different categories.

Well, that went without saying—not even counting our personalities, the athletic girl Kanbaru, the school star, and Koyomi Araragi belonging to different worlds, different categories, was self-evident, so the question was why someone like Suruga Kanbaru had chosen to talk to me.

Not just chosen. Why she continued to.

Why she dashed toward me—and continued to do so.

It couldn't be that she was, in her own words, coming to me because she felt down and needed to cheer herself back up. I didn't have that kind of supernatural power. If I did, I'd be using it liberally on myself.

I'd lost count of how many times I'd asked the question over the last

three days, but I asked again. “So, Kanbaru. What do you want from me?”

“Ah, yes…” She’d been making quick, eloquent replies thus far, but now for the first time seemed to be searching for the right words. But it only took a second before her cheeks were lit by a smile and she opened her mouth. “You must have read the international section of today’s paper, yes? I wanted to hear your thoughts on the unfolding political situation in Russia.”

“Current events?!”

What a topic to ask about, too. I barely knew anything about Japanese politics, but we were crossing the sea and talking about Russia?

“Oh, would India be more to your taste?” she offered. “But as you can guess, sadly I’m something of a jock, an outdoors type, who’s weak on IT-related topics. I have a better feel for the problems facing Russia.”

“I didn’t read the paper this morning,” I gave an excuse so blatant I couldn’t possibly play it down myself. Actually, I do read it, but can’t make enough of anything to partake in a discussion…

Yet Kanbaru merely said “Oh,” and her eyes took on a tender cast. “Well, you are a busy man. I can see how you might not have the time to read the paper in the morning. I apologize, I should have thought of it before blabbering so inconsiderately. We can put the topic off until tomorrow in that case, if that’s all right with you.”

“Sure…”

“How generous of you. I didn’t expect to be forgiven so easily. There is simply no way someone with your gravitas didn’t find my

remark superficial, but you let it go without so much as hinting at your displeasure. Now that's what it means to be a diplomat. I never thought that I could come to like you even more."

"Well, thanks…"

"No need for gratitude. I'm only telling you how I feel."

"……"

Regardless, she seemed pretty smart.

Being both smart and athletic wasn't playing by the rules at all… It wasn't like Hanekawa and Senjogahara were bad at sports, but they couldn't begin to compare to this second-year. Sure, Senjogahara may have been the star of the track team in middle school, but the gap in her résumé after starting high school wasn't negligible—more so if you added in her special circumstances.

Well, of course, I didn't really think that Kanbaru wanted to debate me on the political situation in Russia—that was clearly a pretext. No matter how many times I asked her what she wanted from me, she was this way and wouldn't give a straight reply.

She had to have some objective, but I didn't have the first clue.

Why in the world was she following me around, and so suddenly? She, the star of the entire school, and I, a third-year washout, hadn't a single thing in common.

I ought to be a total stranger to her.

"By the way, did anything odd happen to you today?" she asked.

"Hunh? Not really… Everything's normal." Aside from her. Well, I was starting to get used to her, too. "I have a headache thanks to the skills test we have coming up, I guess?"

“Oh, the skills test. Hm, yes. It’s been giving me a headache as well. It’s quite a pain, as someone involved in an extracurricular. Our school prohibits any practices for a week before the test, so your only choice is to train solo.”

“Huh.”

So that’s how it worked. I had trouble understanding her logic that if the school banned it, she had to work out on her own, instead of just taking a break. But hers was a different world.

“But Kanbaru, isn’t that a good thing, at least from your perspective? Your sprained left hand should heal by then.”

“Hm? Oh…true.” She looked down at her hand. “Impressive, you simply see things in a different way. Always trying to figure out how to make everyone around you happy. You’re a real master of positive thinking.”

“Hey, I could think positively for a hundred years and never get to your level…”

What kind of upbringing turned out people like her?

It baffled me.

“I know it’s a cliché,” she conceded, “but it is a student’s job to study. As annoying as they are, skills tests are skills tests, and I’m not going to take mine lightly.”

“Good thing it wasn’t your right hand.”

“Well, I’m actually a southpaw,” Kanbaru said. “Being left-handed means you have to deal with a lot of day-to-day inconveniences, but the one place it can be an advantage is the world of competitive sports. I treasure my birthright.”

“Huh, really?”

“Mm. That’s common knowledge for anyone in competitive sports. In Japan, parents still tend to correct their children’s left-handedness, so only one out of ten athletes, at most, is a southpaw. What do you think that ratio means in the sport of basketball? It’s a five-on-five game, so on average there’s only one on the court. And that would be me. It’s one of the reasons I was able to become our ace.”

“Huh…” I felt convinced, but of what I wasn’t sure.

“Still, when something like this happens, be it the result of my own carelessness, all I’m left with is a bunch of inconveniences.”

“A southpaw, eh… I don’t really understand any of that because I don’t play sports, but being left-handed just seems cool.”

That was my honest take.

Well, it was more of a preconception, even a prejudice, but somehow every little thing lefties did seemed more stylish to me.

“You say that, but aren’t you left-handed too? Heheh, I noticed immediately because you have your watch on your right wrist. Lefties are quick to pick up on fellow lefties.”

“……”

I wore my watch on my right wrist just because I felt like it, but now I didn’t dare tell her… Was I going to have to write and use chopsticks with my left hand in her presence going forward? Lefties seemed stylish to me, but not to the point where I’d reverse-correct myself…

“So,” I said, “taking the test will be quite a challenge for you. With your good hand in that shape, the Japanese exam will suck bad.”

“True, but since this is a skills test, we won’t have to write essays in any subject, and a few oddly shaped characters here and there shouldn’t be an issue. I’m sure the teachers will take my situation into account, too. Pardon me, it sounds like I’ve caused you undue concern. I do have to say, though, you really do look out for your juniors. To be able to worry about someone like me because you feel so relaxed. That’s no simple feat.”

“…Uh, I don’t know about relaxed.” Far from it. Putting aside whether I’d worry about my juniors if I were relaxed, I was anything but at the moment. “In fact, I’m about to go to a study session today.”

“A study session?” Kanbaru’s confusion was apparent. It wasn’t ringing any bells for her.

“Um, I guess a simple way to put it would be that my grades until now haven’t been the best…plus I had a pretty bad attendance record during my first and second years of high school, so…”

Why was I having to explain to her?

Star or not, she was a year below me, my junior.

“In short, this skills test is my big chance to make a comeback,” I found myself putting a good face on it. I felt small.

“Hmm. I see.” Kanbaru nodded. “I don’t really understand because I’m not the type to hustle when it comes to exam prep, but now that you mention it, my classmates do gather at someone’s house before a test…I think?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I’m doing.”

“Okay. So you’re about to head to a friend’s house. But,” Kanbaru said a little uncertainly, “unlike with sports, I don’t see how working together can help…”

“Don’t worry. I said it was a study session, but it’s a one-on-one where someone’s going to be teaching me, that’s all. It’s like I’m going to be tutored. There’s someone in my class with ridiculously good grades who’s going to be helping me out.”

“Huh… Ohh.” As if she’d just remembered, Kanbaru added, “You’re talking about my senior Senjogahara.”

“…What? You know her?”

“Who else could it be if it’s someone with good grades in your class? I’ve heard rumors about her.”

“Huh… Well, yeah.”

Senjogahara was famous, after all. Maybe it wasn’t surprising that a second-year knew about her.

Hm?

But wait. As far as being famous for good grades went, the first person to come to mind should have been the even more famous Hanekawa, who’d never once ceded her spot at the top of our year. At the very least, it didn’t make sense to be saying it couldn’t be anyone else. Also, if someone mentioned a study session, wouldn’t you normally assume that it was a same-sex affair and bring up a boy’s name, not a girl’s?

Why was she bringing up Senjogahara out of nowhere?

“I shouldn’t get in your way, then,” Kanbaru said. “I think I’ll get going for today.”

“Okay.”

It was very Suruga Kanbaru to stick in the “for today” even as she made a show of not overstaying her welcome.

She squatted and stretched her legs.

Warm-ups.

She took her time stretching her Achilles tendon, and then□

“May fortune smile on you.”

No sooner than she said so, she dashed back the way she came, her footsteps ringing *tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup*. She had strong legs□not only was she fast, she was abnormally quick to hit her top speed. While I doubt her hundred or two hundred meter times are that outstanding, she must be a good match even for members of the track team at ultra-short distances like thirty or fifty feet. That’s where Suruga Kanbaru, an athlete specializing in basketball, a sport where you run in every direction within a limited play field, shines…and then, before I knew it, she was out of sight. Her short skirt flew up from her vigorous motions, but that surely didn’t bother Kanbaru, who wore bike shorts long enough to extend below her skirt.

…Still, I thought, she ought to wear a tracksuit when she runs. That way she’d spare onlookers like me from getting our vile hopes up.

Sheesh, though.

It felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

This encounter had been relatively brief, but…if she didn’t hurry up and reveal why she was following me around, I couldn’t rest easy, since this situation might drag on. Sure, it wasn’t causing me any actual damage or harm, so leaving her be was technically an option, but that personality of Kanbaru’s did more than a little to tire out people like me. No, was there anyone out there who wouldn’t get tired talking to her? If there was□

Yeah. Maybe Senjogahara was the only person on that list.

“Mister Rararagi.”

“…You’re asymptotically closer to the right pronunciation compared to the last thing you called me, but Hachikuji, don’t sing my name like you’re a cartoon dog. My name is Araragi.”

“I’m sorry. A slip of the tongue.”

“No, you’re doing it on purpose…”

“It was a srip.”

“Or maybe not?!”

“It was a trip.”

“What were you seeing?!”

Hachikuji was suddenly back by my side.

She must have returned after realizing that Kanbaru had left. I couldn’t be sure, as this was Hachikuji I was dealing with, but given how promptly she’d come back, maybe she felt her fair share of guilt for running off and leaving me on my own. Perhaps this time, she really had mistaken my name on purpose, to hide her embarrassment.

“What was with that person?” she asked.

“You couldn’t tell by watching us?”

“Hmm. Since she referred to you as her senior, if I may don my thinking hat, is she your junior at school?”

“…That’s some impressive thinking hat.”

If I were Kanbaru, this was where I’d whip out Marlowe or some other classic detective to praise Hachikuji to high heaven, but no□for a moment I thought I might try to borrow a page, but my heart was refusing to let me…

“Even so, Mister Araragi. I was all ears, but it was very hard to understand what that person was getting at. To the very end I couldn’t

figure out the gist of your conversation. Had she chased after you to chat about nothing in particular?"

"Um… Well, Hachikuji, don't ask me because I don't know, either."

"You don't? I can't help but be receptacle."

"So you turned into a trashcan while you were gone?"

Skeptical, I assumed.

I decided to tell Hachikuji exactly what was going on. "That girl's been stalking me."

"Stalking? Like what women wear over their lower bodies?"

"That's a stocking."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you really not know the word? She's been following me no matter how much I try to skirt around her."

"Skirt? Like what women wear over their lower bodies?"

"How did Mister Araragi become so obsessed with what ladies wear below their waists in your mind?"

I thought for a bit to see if I could come up with a word Hachikuji might confuse with bike shorts. Unfortunately, my vocabulary wasn't up to the task, so I gave up and kept the conversation moving.

"I don't understand why, but for about three days now, she's been shadowing me blatantly and then popping up and starting a conversation. One-sidedly, so like you said, I can't figure out what she's trying to get at… I don't know if you'd call it chatting, and I honestly have no idea what her goal is."

Her goal□well, she had to have one.

But I didn't have the first clue what it was.

She was deflecting my attempts to find out, for sure.

The athletic grounds are about the only place third- and second-year students see each other, which means we almost never meet by coincidence—in other words, Kanbaru was making the most of short breaks during the day to seek me out… I'd figured that out, but not much else.

"Hmm. You know, Mister Araragi, isn't there an easy answer sitting right there? Doesn't she just like you?"

"Wha?"

"I believe she said something to that effect."

"…Oh, I guess? Nah, give me a break. It was just a manner of speaking. I'm not a dating sim protagonist, it's not like I'm going to wake up one day and suddenly have girls all over me."

"You're right. Because if you were a dating sim protagonist, I'd be one of your flagged targets, and that's absolutely not happening."

"……"

Did elementary school kids know about dating sims?

Not like I had ever played one, either.

"But if you were," Hachikuji continued, "I'm sure I'd have a high difficulty rating."

"No, I get the feeling you'd be a pushover…"

If not for her shyness attribute, it'd all happen very quickly… In a game with six heroines, she'd be around the fourth to go down.

Of course, if you took the age issue into account, she'd be a highdifficulty character indeed.

"Kanbaru isn't," I objected, "that kind of… Ah, now that you mention it, I guess there are rumors that she goes from one wild romance to the next. Still, she and I had literally nothing to do with

each other until now, okay? Unlike them…unlike Kanbaru and others, I'm not a school celebrity or anything."

But upon further thought, I realized she had at least known my name and what class I was in when she first spoke to me.

Why?

Could she have…asked someone?

"Maybe she saw you picking an abandoned cat off the street," Hachikuji said.

"I've never done that."

In fact, I'd never once stumbled upon a so-called abandoned cat. In the first place, would a cat plunked in a cardboard box labeled "please adopt me" just sit in place?

That would be one well-trained cat.

"Then perhaps she saw you picking garbage off the street?"

"Hold on, did you just put cats on the same level as garbage?"

"It was only a manner of speaking, as you put it, so stop scrounging for reasons to criticize me. That's a very vulgar hobby you have, Mister Araragi, finding sport in castigating weak little girls for things they never said."

"Apologize to catkind. Cats can be scary, you know."

"In any case, love at first sight does exist. They even say that relationships between people in general are based on first impressions. At least, looking at it that way explains why you're being followed around, doesn't it?" Hachikuji was yelping gleefully. She was an elementary schoolgirl in that way. "I'm certain of it, the woman in me is telling me that I'm right. So what will you do, Mister Araragi? She's only nibbling now, but she might confess her feelings for you soon enough.

What will you do, what will you do, what will you do?”

“Listen. I don’t like how people try to see everything in romantic terms. The ‘power of love’ they go on about in old foreign films? Imagine how peaceful the world would be if that did solve everything. No way, no how. Some simple, small-time, realistic goal makes much better sense.

“And anyway,” I said. “I’ve already cleared the highest difficulty character of all.”

“I feel like someone said something unpleasant about me,” Hitagi Senjogahara suddenly mumbled.

The comment was so abrupt and unprovoked that, out of shock, the pencil in my hand froze in place on my notebook.

Yet it seemed she was mumbling entirely to herself because she switched topics.

“Still, teaching is so difficult.”

After that, I’d walked back home with Hachikuji talking about all sorts of things, including about Kanbaru, and parted ways when I arrived. The little girl wandered around in one place or another all the time, so I was sure I’d meet her again somewhere. Then, after taking off my backpack, changing my clothes, and stuffing my textbooks, notes, and study-aids into a Boston bag, I switched from the granny bike I rode to school to my mountain bike and headed to Senjogahara’s. My little sisters had already returned and almost got around to interrogating me, but luckily I managed to escape.

As I’d mentioned to Hachikuji, Senjogahara’s place was fairly far from mine, a distance I normally wouldn’t travel by bicycle. But taking the bus actually meant having to walk more, so going by bike felt quicker to me□which was subjective, and since this was only my second time visiting Senjogahara’s, and the first time straight from my place, I couldn’t say for sure.

The Tamikura Apartments□a two-story wooden building.

Room 201.

A hundred-or-so square feet, a small sink.

It was so cramped that two high school students of average build facing each other across a low table with their study materials spread out around them filled up the space. It was what you'd call a single-father household, and Senjogahara what you'd call an only child, and her father what you'd call stuck at work until late at night, so we were, of course, alone.

Koyomi Araragi and Hitagi Senjogahara.

Two healthy teenagers by themselves in a cramped room.

A man and a woman.

Who were officially going out, too.

Boyfriend and girlfriend.

And yet.

"…Why am I studying right now," I said.

"Hm? Because you're stupid?"

"What a mean way to put it!"

She was absolutely right. But.

It couldn't hurt if there was a little more going on.

We started dating on the same day we got ourselves mixed up with Mayoi Hachikuji, on Mother's Day, May fourteenth. About two weeks had passed since then, but it would be no exaggeration to say that absolutely nothing sexual had taken place between us in that time.

……

Hold on, we hadn't even gone on a date yet.

Come to think of it.

We met in the morning at school, talked during break…ate lunch

together…then walked home together partway…and said see you tomorrow. That was about it. That was the kind of thing that the cooler kids did regardless of gender if they were friends…

I wouldn't say that I particularly craved a sexual turn of events, but some development you'd expect between lovers would have been nice.

"In my life so far, Araragi, I've never struggled at anything involving the word 'study,' so I don't have the slightest idea what's giving you so much trouble and what you're stuck on… I don't understand what you don't understand."

"Is that so…"

She really knew what to say to get me down.

How wide was the gap between her academic abilities and mine, anyway? Was it a canyon so vast you couldn't see the other side?

"Are you acting like you don't get it," Senjogahara asked, "just to make me laugh?"

"Like I'd go that far… But it's not like you were born smart, right, Senjogahara? Isn't it thanks to blood and tears that you maintain your place near the top of the class?"

"Do you think that's the kind of thing people who work hard worry about?"

"…Okay."

"Oh, but don't get me wrong. There are people whose hard work never pays off, who don't even know how to begin working hard, like you, and I do pity them."

"Please don't pity us!"

"I despair for you."

"G-Gah! Is the rule that whenever I make a quip about it, you get

even harsher?! Even begging for mercy is a risky move!”

Bizarre game we were playing.

“No weed actually goes by that name,” she said, “but ‘small fry’ is an actual species of fish…”

“There’s no such fish, either!”

“No weed actually goes by that name, but there are people who do…”

“Only if other people call them that!”

“Anyway, I’m feeling motivated because helping you pass this skills test will let me take another step forward as a person.”

“Don’t be treating my grades like they’re your rite of passage… And there are other things you ought to attend to first if you want to grow as a person.”

“Oh, be quiet. I’ve strangled you to death.”

“In the present perfect tense?! Am I already dead?!”

Getting her to teach me may have been a mistake… Hmm, should I have just asked Hanekawa?

However.

Despite my protestations to Hachikuji, I had to admit to a motive so cute it would be embarrassing even to call it ulterior, that just maybe something might happen if I was alone with Senjogahara in her home…

I looked up from my notes to glance at her.

She looked unconcerned as always.

Her expression never really changed.

She wasn’t going to reveal a special face that she’d never show anyone else just because we were going out… In that sense, she wasn’t a tsundere at all.

Her attitude didn't change one bit, either.

Hmm.

Or was I expecting too much, as I tended to do? I'd vaguely imagined that conversations grew more special once you started going out, but maybe what you discussed with another person didn't change all that much whatever your relationship? Were my thoughts of sweet talk between lovers nothing more than an idiotic fantasy?

"……"

In all likelihood.

Considering Senjogahara's experiences, the events that made Hitagi Senjogahara into Hitagi Senjogahara□she certainly had her notions regarding chastity and all, but apart from that, in all likelihood she was satisfied with the current state of our relationship.

She'd told me she didn't like silent partnerships.

Since she said so, she probably didn't.

…No.

Even then…

It was hard to imagine that Senjogahara didn't feel a thing in this situation. In fact, it had developed in a much more sexual way the last time I'd visited the Tamikura Apartments… It wasn't like she was too unworldly not to have a clue about what it meant to invite her ostensible boyfriend to her home with no guardian around… And when I looked at it that way, Senjogahara did seem to have put a little bit of work into the outfit she was wearing across the low table from me, but the awfully long skirt sat on my mind. Her stockingless legs were bare, but I could hardly see them thanks to that long skirt of hers. It felt like it was caution she had put into her outfit, not thought.

Phew.

Or maybe it was my role as the man to show some initiative? Of course, I'd never gone out with a girl before, so I hardly even knew what initiative looked like.

"What's the matter, Araragi? Your hands have stopped."

"Nothing… I was just thinking about the high challenge rating."

"But this one isn't so hard. What am I going to do with you?"

Showing no interest in making out my mood, Senjogahara just gave me an utterly appalled look. Her eyes seemed accustomed to dispensing condescension.

Then she mumbled, melancholically, "I guess that's it."

"Huh? Hold on, Senjogahara, you're putting your mechanical pencil aside like you're fed up and giving off this tired air, but is quitting on me actually an option for you?"

"I won't say that it isn't," she declared. "60-40…no, 70-30, maybe?"

"Whichever is the seventy, that's an awfully realistic ratio…"

It would have been easier on me if she'd said 90-10.

Really, which was the seventy?

"I'm conflicted, you see. Trying and failing would hurt my pride more than not trying and failing."

"Please don't quit on me…"

If she did, I'd have to ask Hanekawa after all.

At the end of the day, that wasn't something I wanted to do.

Being tutored by our class president, who bought wholesale the commonsensical notion that you did well in school if you just tried, was out of the question…

"Well, if you're going to go that far, then I won't quit on you."

“You’d really be helping me out.”

“Not at all. I accept all comers and won’t let any go.”

“What a frightening philosophy!”

“Don’t worry. If I’m doing this, I might as well die doing it.”

“You don’t have to die! Maybe just tire yourself out! What the hell do you have in mind for me?!”

“…Then again, Araragi. I want to say you’re good at math, at least?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

How did she know?

Before I could throw the question at her, Senjogahara said, “Hanekawa told me.”

That made sense. Hanekawa knew my grades better than anyone.

“Huh,” I grunted. “I never saw Hanekawa as the type to go around discussing other people’s grades, though.”

“Oh, maybe I didn’t word it right. I was secretly listening in when you and Hanekawa were talking the other day.”

“…You certainly didn’t word it right.”

Hearsay was bad enough, but now we were at eavesdropping.

“You think?” deadpanned Senjogahara.

She was such a handful.

“I do all right in math because it isn’t all about memorization,” I explained. “Aren’t formulas and equations almost like special moves? An Ultra Beam or a Kamehameha or something. If only other subjects had them, too…”

“If things were so convenient, no one would have a hard time of it.

But putting aside actually learning about the subjects, there are tried-and-true techniques, if not special moves, when it comes to studying for tests." Senjogahara picked her mechanical pencil back up. "One of them is trying to guess what'll be on the test, which you don't want to make a habit of because it's like gambling. While I generally don't recommend it, stopgap measures might be our only choice at this point. If we get down to it, you just need to avoid getting F's. If we say the cutoff line is half of the average score…"

She scribbled numbers in her notebook.

The expected average score, and a number that was half of it.

I had to say, when she put them out there like that, it did seem attainable□as my perfect score, that is.

"In memorization-heavy subjects, teachers have 'questions that they have to ask,' so we need to set our sights on those. In other words, we're taking a laser-focused approach instead of making wild guesses. You don't want to get bogged down by questions you can't answer and miss the chance to score on ones you can. Do you understand what I'm saying so far, Araragi?"

"…Sure, I get it."

Still, smart kids really did see tests in a completely different way… The teacher's mindset in preparing them was something I'd never given any thought to. Actually, no, maybe I did back in middle school, when I still got decent grades… But that felt like a forgotten fable.

Back in middle school.

I didn't miss those days at all.

"So," Senjogahara said, "let's start with an easy subject. World history."

“World history is an easy subject?”

“It is. All you have to do is memorize all the important terms.”

“……”

“But like I said, I’m not going to expect you to do even that much. Still, Araragi. You’ll probably pass this skills test if you start studying right now with my help, but what in the world are you planning on doing after that?”

“After that?”

“After you graduate,” replied Senjogahara, pointing the tip of her mechanical pencil at me.

“After I graduate… This is kind of sudden.”

“You’re at the end of your second month of your last year of high school. You must have given it at least a little bit of thought. I know you said something along the lines of only caring about making it to graduation, but does that mean you’re going to find a job right away? Do you have some sort of concrete plan? A connection or an in at some company?”

“Umm…”

“Are you going to be a temp at first? Or maybe you’ll just be a NEET? I don’t really like any of that terminology because they oversimplify a real issue, but of course, your own views and wishes take precedence. Oh, but I suppose you could always learn a trade at a vocational school to start off?”

“What are you, my mother?”

She was getting very detailed about this.

Peppering me with all these questions wasn’t going to drag an answer out of me… Couldn’t Senjogahara tell that I was already

overwhelmed by the skills test staring me down?

“Your mother? What are you talking about. I’m your girlfriend.”

“……”

The straightforward reply.

Her special move.

In a way, it was even deadlier than her acid tongue.

For me, at least.

“After I graduate… Hmm. You’re right, I do need to decide soon. Well, how about you, Senjogahara?”

“College. Probably on a recommendation and scholarship.”

“…I see.”

“Was saying ‘probably’ too modest of me?”

“By your standards.”

“Anyway, college.”

“College, huh.”

She said it like it was only natural.

Maybe it was, for her.

As with what she’d earlier, it was probably going to be a mystery to me for the rest of my life if I didn’t get it now, but I wondered how it felt like for a smart person to be a smart person.

She added, “The tuition issue certainly narrows down my path. Saying ‘fortunately’ might be too self-deprecating, but it’s not like there’s anything in particular I want to do, so I guess I’m letting that path guide me.”

“Well, no matter where you go, you’ll be you, I’m sure.”

“Right. But,” Senjogahara said, “I’d like to walk the same path as you if I can.”

“Er…that’s a little…”

I was honestly happy to hear that, but the laws of physics practically ruled it out…

Right, Senjogahara nodded. “Ignorance is a crime, but stupidity isn’t. Since it’s not a crime, it’s the punishment. If you’d only been more virtuous in your past life like me, poor Araragi, then this wouldn’t have happened. Now I know exactly how the ant felt as it watched the grasshopper freeze to death. Getting me to identify with a bug is no mean feat, mind you.”

“……”

Bear it…

A retort would only cause the knife to dig in deeper…

“Why not just let it go and drop dead?” Senjogahara continued. “Even a grasshopper becomes useful as a carcass when the ant deigns to feed on its nutrients.”

“Next time we meet, it’ll be in court!”

I couldn’t bear it.

I lacked the necessary mental fortitude.

“You say so, Senjogahara, but doing different things after graduation doesn’t have to mean not walking down the same path, yeah?”

“True. You’re absolutely right. But if I have a sudden change of heart in college because I’m going to co-ed mixers all the time, what will I do?”

“Ready to make the most of campus life, are you?!”

“In that case, should we live together after graduation?” she suggested all too casually. “That way, even if we’re doing different

things, we might spend even more time together than we do now."

"Well…that's not a bad idea."

"Not a bad idea? I don't like your tone."

"…Yes, I'd like to. Please, let's do that."

"You think?"

With that, she cast her eyes back down on her textbook in the most unassuming manner. She was acting nonchalant, and the timing of her remark had made it sound almost frivolous, but even someone as unobservant as me saw by now that she wasn't the type to jest at such a moment.

This was Hitagi Senjogahara I was dealing with.

…Anyway, she seemed to be thinking two steps ahead.

Or instead of taking it that way□maybe I should receive it as a sign of Senjogahara's earnest interest in our relationship. Not many high school couples took going out as seriously as she did.

Going out, though. What did that mean?

It was a verbal promise not backed up by anything.

Sigh.

It was no good. I'd never gone out with a girl before, so I didn't just not know how to take the initiative, I had no idea how to react in my situation.

Not even the first clue.

May I ought to have played some dating sims.

They'd have served as reference, at least.

Then again, beating a game was one thing, while you could never

“clear” reality.

“You’re sighing a lot, Araragi. Did you know that a small happiness slips away every time you sigh?”

“If that’s true, I’d have to measure my loss in K’s…”

“How many you’ve let away doesn’t concern me at all, but I wish you wouldn’t sigh around me. It makes me sick.”

“You’re horrible.”

“What I meant is lovesick.”

“…Er, as the straight man, I don’t even know how to respond to that one.”

I was even feeling a little happy.

A clever trap for the straight man.

“By the way, Araragi,” Senjogahara said, “I’ve never broken up with a boy before.”

“……”

No, this was an example of why wordings mattered.

She made it sound like she was a smooth gal with many suitors, but wasn’t she simply announcing that she had no prior experience whatsoever with men?

“So,” she continued at any rate, “I don’t intend to break up with you, either.”

Her expression remained placid. It didn’t shift even a little, not an eyebrow moving. It made me wonder if she had any emotions at all. But she still had to be thinking about it.

Two years.

Since the time between middle school and high school, when she’d been neither a middle schooler nor a high schooler nor even on break,

Hitagi Senjogahara had shunned all contact with other people. If she had forgotten how to interact with human beings, if she'd grown extraordinarily passive or unnecessarily timid—you couldn't blame her for it. It was like dealing with a cautious stray cat—though Hanekawa fit the bill better as far as cats go.

Maybe neither of us knew how to take the initiative.

"…Hey, Senjogahara?"

"What is it."

"Are you still carrying staplers and stuff?"

"Now that you mention it…not lately."

"Ah."

"I must have gotten careless."

"Careless, huh?"

Well—you could still call that progress.

It wasn't big enough of a change to make her a tsundere, but if that was her personality—

…Hm, by the way. Speaking of Senjogahara two years ago—

"Hey, weren't you the star of the track team when you were in middle school?" I asked.

"Correct."

"You don't do that anymore?"

"Correct. Because there's no reason to," she answered pretty much instantly. "I have no desire to go back to that time in my life."

"Hmph…"

Apparently, Senjogahara had been a nice, sociable person, kind to everyone, a hard worker, not at all stuck-up, the respected star of the track team in middle school—cheerful and full of energy. It was no more

than a rumor, but I found it pretty credible.

That all changed right before high school.

Then, two years later.

What had changed about her was back to normal.

Back□but not everything, of course.

Certainly not if she lacked the desire.

“I don’t see the need or necessity, and above all, the good it would do me at this point, Araragi□there’s a lot more I have to carry with me now. I’m already a third-year, anyway. But why do you ask?”

“Oh, I was just interested in what you were like back when you played sports… And yeah, given the hiatus, I see why you might not bother.”

Just as cats meant Tsubasa Hanekawa, sports were now synonymous with Suruga Kanbaru for me, and I’d asked with her in the back of my mind, but…that’s what you called a brusque response.

You could say Senjogahara was facing forward□but.

Was refusing to look back the same as facing forward?

Senjogahara, I began to think, was still…

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I don’t need to play sports to maintain my figure.”

“…Hey, that’s not why I was asking.”

“You were drawn to these supple, carefree limbs that have never known a breakup, weren’t you?”

“Stop assuming that I’m after your body!”

And that phrase “carefree limbs”…

It was a bit much.

“Oh. So it wasn’t my body?” she inquired innocently. “I guess that

means you can wait for a while.”

That’s what she wanted to say?

If so, it was so roundabout and awfully devious, quite unlike her trademark straightforward approach.

Chastity, eh?

But it had to be about more than that.

“Araragi, I know you aren’t a shameless, stingy bastard who pays for an all-you-can-eat buffet only to wonder if you’ve ‘eaten your money’s worth’ and rushes to ‘try a little more so it won’t be a waste’ when it’s going to be the same price anyway.”

“……”

I wasn’t quite sure what her analogy was trying to imply, but it had to be some sort of pickoff move…

She was timid with people.

Prudent in her relationship with me.

Well, I was willing to go along with that.

I still didn’t get what going “out” with her was about, but if that’s what I was doing, then I was going along with all of her.

“…Oh, right,” I remembered and decided that I needed to tell Senjogahara about Suruga Kanbaru. I’d kept mum not so much because Senjogahara might get worried over nothing, but rather simply to avoid annoying her, but interpreting Suruga Kanbaru’s motives in light of Hachikuji’s eminently grade-school take and the remote possibility that she was right, it didn’t feel all that fair, given my position, to withhold the fact from my (ostensible) girlfriend.

And I did have Kanbaru in the back of my mind just a moment ago.

There was something I was curious about, too.

“Hey, Senjogahara.”

“What is it.”

“Do you know Suruga Kanbaru?”

“……”

She replied with silence.

Or I should say, made no reply.

In terms of what was and wasn’t fair, my question itself probably wasn’t fair at all—I mean, who didn’t know about the school star, Suruga Kanbaru? The fact that she was stalking me would circulate as a rumor by the beginning of next week at the latest, if it wasn’t out already. I could rest assured that it would be treated as a false one—but that was precisely why my question took on an odd significance. I was suffering the silence I’d brought about and restraining myself from following up, when—

“Yes,” Senjogahara said, “Suruga Kanbaru. That name takes me back.”

“…Oh.”

So—they were acquainted after all.

I’d thought they might be.

When I mentioned my study session, Kanbaru had immediately named Senjogahara and not Hanekawa, who has the best grades in our year—and that wasn’t all. I’d picked up the same suggestion from various remarks that she’d made. The possibility that Hachikuji raised had eluded me thanks to my vague, no, clear sense that Kanbaru wasn’t after me, but some other goal—

“Is that why you asked me about middle school just now?” added Senjogahara. “Yes, she used to be my junior, in middle school.”

“Well, she still is. You go to the same school, don’t you? Or wait, do you mean that girl was on the track team in middle school?”

“No, she was on the basketball team from the time she was in middle school. ‘That girl’… You sound awfully close with her.”

In an instant, the look in Senjogahara’s eyes turned hostile. Normally free of any emotions at all, they now gleamed with danger. Not waiting even a second to see if I’d offer some sort of explanation, she took the mechanical pencil in her right hand and thrust it forward, the tip homing in on my left eye at an alarming velocity. My first instinct was to get out of its way, but even as she moved her right hand, she climbed over the low table on her knees, indifferent to all the notes she sent flying in the process, and used her left hand to cradle the back of my head, preventing me.

The tip of the mechanical pencil was so close to my eyeball it seems absurd to say she stopped short of anything. It was so close I couldn’t blink, freezing me in place. In fact, I had to wonder if the left hand cradling my head was a considerate gesture meant to hinder extraneous movements on my part that might spoil her precision, that’s how perfectly orchestrated it was.

…H-Hitagi Senjogahara.

You might not be carrying a stapler now, but you haven’t changed one bit!

“What about that girl, Araragi?”

“……!”

Hold on!

Was she this jealous?!

It was almost laughable how committed she felt… And how did that even sound like we were close? I'd referred to a junior as "that girl," no more. This was my punishment for merely knowing another girl without Senjogahara's knowledge? What in heaven's name was she going to do to me if I actually cheated on her?

While I did find myself in a ghastly situation, I was also relieved that I'd decided to tell her early.

Thank goodness I'd learned about this side of Senjogahara through a case where I had plenty of excuses to give!

"You heal from injuries incredibly fast, right? So a single eyeball can't be that bad, can it?"

"Stop, no! No, an eyeball would still be bad! There's nothing here I ought to feel guilty about, I don't see us as close at all, you're the only girl for me, Senjogahara!"

"Oh, am I? I like how those words make me feel."

And then she pulled back the mechanical pencil. She spun it around a couple of times in her palm, placed it on top of the low table, and rearranged the scattered notes and textbooks. I tried to calm my still-pounding heart as I watched her.

"I might have gotten a little excited there. Did I surprise you, Araragi?"

"…You know you're going to kill someone one of these days."

"And when I do, I'll make sure it's you. You're going to be my first guy. I wouldn't choose anyone else. I promise."

"Don't spout scary stuff like they're sweet lines! Listen, I love you, but not enough to be killed by you!"

“To be loved to death, to be killed by the one you love. Could there be any better way to die?”

“I’d rather take a pass on that kind of twisted love!”

“Really? That’s too bad. And I can’t believe you’d say that. If it was by your hands, Araragi□”

“You wouldn’t mind being killed?”

“…Hm? Oh, uh, well, I guess.”

“What a vague answer!”

“Well, um, I suppose I would?”

“Followed by a vague refusal!”

“What’s the big problem? Just accept it for what it is. If I were to kill you, Araragi, I would be the one by your side during your final moments. Isn’t that romantic?”

“No. If I’m going to get killed, you’re my last choice for the killer. No matter who kills me in what way, for me, it’s better than getting killed by you.”

“What? I won’t have that. If someone else ever kills you, Araragi, I’m going to kill whoever did it. Aren’t promises made to be broken?”

“……”

Her love was already pretty twisted.

I did feel loved, nevertheless…

“In any case, we were talking about Kanbaru,” Senjogahara tossed aside our frightening line of discussion and put the conversation back on track with her usual aplomb. “While we played different sports, I was the star of the track team while she was the star of the basketball team. Even though we weren’t in the same year, we did associate□and also.”

“And also?”

“Well, it’s not really worth mentioning now, but in our private lives away from sports, you could say that I caused her a bit of trouble, or maybe that I troubled myself over her… Wait, Araragi.” Senjogahara turned the subject to me. “What we should be talking about right now is why you brought up that kid. If you’re not guilty of anything, you shouldn’t mind explaining.”

“S-Sure.”

“Of course, if you were guilty, I’d have you explain anyway.”

“……”

Senjogahara might actually kill me if I tried keeping secrets from her, so I told her that Suruga Kanbaru had been stalking me for the past three days. A second-year who dashed up to me with a quick and rhythmical *tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup,* who rambled for a while, and who left without hinting at any objective at all—Suruga Kanbaru. She had to have one, but I didn’t know what it was.

As I explained this, I began to think.

Kanbaru was probably choosing moments when Senjogahara wasn’t around and coming up to me then. With the exception of today, when she dashed over my way even though I was with Hachikuji, she was basically lying in wait for me to be alone. In other words, it wasn’t by chance that Senjogahara hadn’t known about the stalking until now.

And there was something else I started to think about.

Wasn’t Senjogahara the one referring to Kanbaru in a familiar way? Calling her “that kid” even if she’d been a year behind in middle school sounded more than a little—no, maybe it was just a manner of speaking, too.

Just as Senjogahara’s emotions didn’t show on her face, they didn’t

seep into her voice. No matter what she said, it was almost all in the same flat tone. You shuddered to fathom the strength of will she was exerting to control herself.

But *that kid.*

"I see," Senjogahara finally nodded after hearing most of the story. And yes, she still had the same expression and flat tone. "Um, Araragi?"

"What is it."

"What's flooded on top and in blazes on the bottom?"

"…"

Why a riddle all of a sudden?

Wondering when she'd turned into the kind of character who asked riddles, I decided to humor her for the time being. I knew the answer to this one, fortunately.

"A cauldron, right?"

"Bzzt. The correct answer is," Senjogahara enlightened me in the same monotone, "Suruga Kanbaru's house."

"What are you planning on doing to the home of our school's basketball star?!"

Now I was really scared!

Her eyes were so still, too!

"Jokes aside," she said.

"Your jokes are no joke, okay? Not when you might follow up on them."

"Really? But since you insist, Araragi, I'll keep my jokes non-practical."

"That's only normal…"

"Kanbaru found out about my secret a year before you,"

Senjogahara told me like it was nothing special in her usual tone, only a tad irritated. “I’d just become a second-year, so it was right after Kanbaru started at Naoetsu High. Considering its location, I’d already foreseen that a junior who knew me would be coming to our school, so I’d thought about what to do but with Kanbaru, I guess I let my guard down a little.”

“Huh.”

Hitagi Senjogahara.

The secret she’d borne

I’d learned it by catching her after she’d tripped on the stairs by chance, so to speak. But on the flip side, you could say her secret was so precarious that mere chance was sufficient to expose it. In fact, Senjogahara had told me I wasn’t the first to find out so Kanbaru…

Knowing Kanbaru’s personality.

“I bet that gir…Kanbaru probably tried to save you or something, didn’t she?”

“Yes, indeed. Though I refused,” Senjogahara replied calmly, as if coupling those phrases were a standard construction, a grammatical staple. “I dealt with her the way I did with you. You tried to get involved anyway, Araragi. Kanbaru never came back after that. That was all our relationship amounted to.”

“…She never came back.”

So that was a year ago.

The refusal must have been thorough. It must have been immeasurably more intense than in my case since Kanbaru knew about Senjogahara’s past as a middle school track star quite well. Otherwise Kanbaru, given her nature, wouldn’t have given up without

a fight. I recalled that according to Senjogahara, at the May eighth stage, when I learned her secret—the only person who knew about *it* at that moment apart from me was Harukami, the health teacher.

At that moment.

In other words, Suruga Kanbaru had noticed her secret in the past, but Senjogahara had forced her to forget. One of the poor victims…no, casualties—but had Kanbaru, of all people, really been able to forget about Senjogahara?

"…You were friends, weren't you?"

"Yes, in middle school," Senjogahara admitted. "It's different now. We're complete strangers."

"But your…situation has changed compared to a year ago. I mean, we cleared up that secret of yours, so—"

"Didn't I just tell you, Araragi?" she cut me off. "I don't intend to go back to any of that."

"……"

"That's how I've decided to live my life."

"Oh…"

Well.

If that was her decision about her own life, it didn't seem like my place to butt in—at least that's how the logic usually went. And Senjogahara wasn't so glib as to offer to bury the hatchet with someone she'd rejected so harshly just because her condition had become a thing of the past.

"Still…" I said. "I get your relationship with Kanbaru, but that doesn't explain why she's following me around, does it."

“She must have found out that we’re going out. We started dating two weeks ago, and the stalking started three days ago, so the timing seems to work out fine.”

“What? You mean she’s curious what kind of guy Hitagi Senjogahara’s boyfriend is…and she’s checking me out?”

“I think it’s something like that. Sorry for the trouble, Araragi. I won’t mouth any excuses. This is on me for not being able to liquidate my relationships.”

“Liquidate…”

What a word to use.

Knowing her, it didn’t even sound figurative.

“Not to worry,” she assured. “I’ll take responsibility for□”

“Don’t! Don’t take responsibility! God knows what you mean by that! This is nothing, it’s my problem so I’ll take care of it!”

“Why so shy? Don’t be so standoffish.”

“I’m just afraid you’ll turn it into a different kind of standoff…”

Hrrm.

In any case, or even so, it didn’t make sense to me.

“You shooed Kanbaru away in no mild fashion a year ago, right? And it’s been that way since? Would she still care if you got a boyfriend?”

“If it were an everyday case of an estranged senior finding a boyfriend, then sure□but this is different, isn’t it? Araragi. You did something she couldn’t, so actually I’m not surprised. The way she sees it, you succeeded where she failed.”

“Ah…I get it.”

She learned Hitagi Senjogahara’s secret…but was turned away,

rejected, harshly and mercilessly. A little reasoning was all it took to arrive at the assumption that I, as the boyfriend, couldn't possibly not know the secret, and seeing me by Senjogahara's side *even as I knew* surely must have given Kanbaru some food for thought.

At the same time.

Kanbaru probably didn't realize that the secret itself had been resolved. Because if her reasoning were that good, she'd have reached out to Senjogahara instead of me, or so I assumed.

"Hitagi Senjogahara was someone Kanbaru looked up to, if I do say so myself," Senjogahara divulged, averting her gaze from me. "I knew I was in that position, and I did try to act the part. What could I do? I think there was nothing else I could do. So in rejecting her, I was extra careful to make a clean break□yes. But I guess the kid hasn't forgotten about me after all."

"…You shouldn't say that like she's annoying. She's not doing it out of malice, right? And anyway, people forgetting you is a pretty depress□"

"She's annoying," Senjogahara declared without a shred of hesitation. "The presence or absence of malice isn't the issue."

"Come on, don't be like that… If she looked up to you, and she's still concerned about you…well, it might be weird to call it 'making up,' but don't you have some room in your heart for her?"

"I don't. It's already been a year, it was in middle school that we were friends, and yes, it would be weird to call it 'making up.' I told you I'm not going back to any of that. Or are you saying I should walk up to her after all this time and apologize for making her wait so long? That

would be the height of idiocy.”

Then, as if to close the door on that conversation, and also as if she’d just come up with something, Senjogahara changed the topic. She was, as always, slick.

“Oh, right. By the way, Araragi, do you have plans to meet Mister Oshino anytime soon?”

“Oshino? Well, I guess you could say I do…”

Maybe not Oshino—but I needed to let Shinobu drink my blood, and it was about time for me to go by that abandoned cram school. It was Friday, so I’d make some time tomorrow, or maybe the day after tomorrow…

“Okay. In that case.”

Senjogahara silently stood up, grabbed an envelope from atop her dresser, came back to me, and held it out. The envelope had a post office mark printed on it.

“Could you give this to Mister Oshino for me?”

“What is this… Ohhh.”

I realized as soon as I’d asked.

Mèmè Oshino—

That frivolous Hawaiian-shirted bastard’s payment for services rendered.

What he required to remove Senjogahara’s secret, the calamity that had befallen her—his remuneration, or simply put, his payment.

A hundred thousand yen, if I remembered correctly.

I checked inside to make sure, and indeed, ten ten-thousand-yen bills were inside. Exactly ten bills, crisp and probably fresh from the bank.

“Wow…you got that together faster than I thought you would. You made it sound like it would take you a while. Weren’t you going to take a part-time job or something?”

“I did,” Senjogahara said nonchalantly. “I got my father to let me help him out with his work. Well, I guess it’d be more accurate to say I forced him, but that’s how I earned the money.”

“Huh.”

Senjogahara’s father worked at some foreign company□and maybe that was the right choice for her? Regular part-time jobs didn’t seem suited to her personality, and our school forbade us from taking them in the first place.

“I was reluctant because getting help from my father somehow felt like cheating, but as someone who grew up in a family mired in debt, attending to money matters is a must. There was a little bit left over, so I’ll buy you lunch some time at the cafeteria. The food at our school is pretty good but reasonably priced, so you know, order anything you want.”

“…Thanks.”

Still, it was the cafeteria.

A weekday lunch break.

Did she not intend to go on a date with me, ever?

“But in that case,” I asked, “why not just go and give it to him yourself?”

“Nope. Because I hate Mister Oshino.”

“Understood…”

She was so direct about her savior.

What was mature about Senjogahara, though, was that she still felt

grateful towards him.

Of course, it wasn't like I loved Oshino, either.

"If I had my way," she said, "I'd never meet him again, and I don't want to have anything to do with him in the future. Not with someone who acts like he sees through people."

"Yeah, I think you're right that you and Oshino are incompatible. He has that frivolous and mocking attitude, and it clashes with your personality," I said, placing the envelope next to my floor cushion. I slapped the envelope and nodded at Senjogahara. "Okay, I get it. If that's how it is, I won't say another word. I'll take good care of this, and I'll be sure to give it to Oshino the next time I meet him."

"I appreciate it."

"Yup."

Then I thought□

Compatibility.

Attitude.

Personality.

Wasn't that second-year Suruga Kanbaru's out-of-left-field character□the exact flip side of Senjogahara's? In terms of compatibility, attitude, personality, and everything else.

Senjogahara had been the star of the track team in middle school.

Moreover, she'd been admired. The worshipping gazes that she'd drawn□couldn't have been Kanbaru's alone. In that position, Senjogahara had played a certain character□she must have played a character that was the polar opposite of her current verbally abusive, acid-tongued self.

Abuse and flattery.

Acid tongue, soothing tongue.

Polar opposites.

Flip side.

Which meant.

“So, Araragi.” Senjogahara’s eyes were devoid of emotion. “Let’s get back to studying. Are you familiar with Thomas Edison’s famous observation? He said that genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. A great quote, worthy of a genius. But I bet he thought the one percent was more important. Don’t they say that’s about all that separates a human’s genes from a monkey’s?”

It was two years for Senjogahara—and two weeks for me.

The start of Golden Week to its finish for Hanekawa.

For Hachikuji, who knows. I can't say exactly how long.

I'm talking about the periods we were in contact with aberrations—the amounts of time our *abnormal experiences* lasted. It was over those periods, those spans that our improbable, dreadful experiences, which were anything but normal, lasted.

Take Koyomi Araragi.

My case.

In this day and age, amidst our twenty-first-century civilization, it's so embarrassing that it makes me want to find a hole and jump in it, but I fell victim to a venerable old vampire—a bloodcurdlingly scary terror, a traditional and legendary vampire, sucked every last drop of blood from my body.

She sucked me dry.

And I became a vampire.

I was afraid of the sun, hated crosses, avoided garlic, and kept my distance from holy water, and in return, gained physical abilities that were tens, hundreds, thousands of times greater than a human's, but once again in return, I felt an absolute hunger for human blood—like one of those nightwalkers so popular now in manga, anime, and movies. Really, it felt unfair to have become such a true-to-form vampire. These days they were fine walking around in daylight, wore crosses as

accessories, ate garlic bread and washed them down with holy water, but still had absurd physical abilities—wasn't that just mainstream now?

And yet.

A vampire having to suck human blood seems to be the one constant.

They're bloodsucking demons, after all.

In the end, it was a dude passing by, not a vampire hunter, not a Christian spec ops team, not a vampire who hunted his own kind, but a regular dude passing by, a frivolous Hawaiian-shirted bastard named Mèmè Oshino who saved me from that hell—but that did nothing to erase the fact that I'd lived through those two weeks.

A demon.

A cat.

A crab.

A snail.

Still, I couldn't allow myself to forget that there was a decisive difference between me and the other three. An especially large one, in particular, between Hitagi Senjogahara's case and Koyomi Araragi's.

I don't mean the length of time, but the depth of our loss.

She didn't intend to go back to that—she said.

But despite her talk about there being no need or necessity, didn't she mean that she couldn't go back to that time in her life even if she wanted to?

I say that because…for two years, she'd refused anything and everything you could call social contact. Hitagi Senjogahara had spent two years associating with no one in her class—and now that those two years were over, nothing had changed.

Aside from me, nothing had changed.

Koyomi Araragi was merely a unique exception for Senjogahara, and she hadn't changed at all aside from that.

There was no difference between her before and her after.

She just stopped going to the nurse's office.

She just started participating in P.E. class.

She sat in the corner of the classroom and read silently. As if reading a book, in our classroom, was a way to build sturdy walls against her classmates.

She talked to me now, but that really was it.

She ate lunch with me now, and that was it.

A quiet model student prone to illness—that was still the position she occupied in our class. All that our classmates thought was that her condition must have improved somewhat, to whatever degree.

Hanekawa, our class president, innocently welcomed it, however, as a major change—but I couldn't share her simple optimism at the new picture.

Maybe Senjogahara hadn't lost anything.

Maybe she'd thrown it away.

But you ended up with the same result.

I absolutely don't want to sound like I know it all, and I probably won't learn the truth no matter how I relate to her going forward—and I bet I shouldn't be second-guessing her.

Interfering, meddling, all that doesn't seem right.

But I can't help but wonder.

What if.

If Senjogahara not carrying a stapler around anymore is progress…

if that is a change, then might not there be a *furthermore*?

Not just in relation to me.

About the other stuff, too, if□

“Hello?”

“Yes, thank you for waiting. This is Hanekawa speaking.”

“……”

Sure, that was a very proper way to answer a call, but wasn’t it a bit odd on a cell phone?

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

The class president□a high-end model student.

A woman who seemed like a born class president.

A class president among class presidents elected by the gods themselves□I’d meant it as a joke at first, but after spending two months working alongside her as class vice president, I came to see how seriously fitting the description was. All knowledge ought to be cherished by human beings, but I wish I’d been spared this particular tidbit.

“What’s the matter? It’s not every day that you call me, Araragi.”

“Nothing, really□it’s just, I had a question I wanted to ask you.”

“A question? Sure, that’s fine with me. Oh, is this about what our class will be doing for the culture festival? I think it’d be better if you didn’t give it much thought until after the skills test□you’re in a pretty tight spot, right? I can take care of all the busywork, of course. Or did you want to rethink what we’re doing? That’d be tough since we took a survey. Oh, or is there some problem and do we have no choice? We need to deal with it right away in that case.”

“…You didn’t even give me a chance to nod along.”

Hanekawa really advanced the conversation all on her own.

Not only was she quick to make assumptions, she was an even quicker talker.

It was hard work to find your opening with her.

Eight at night.

I was on my way back from the Tamikura Apartments, Senjogahara’s home, and was pushing my bike down the asphalt road instead of striding the saddle. It wasn’t because Hachikuji was by my side, nor because Kanbaru had spotted me and dashed up to me, that I was pushing my bike rather than pedaling. I just needed to think a little.

I ended up cramming until eight at night.

Despite naive hopes that maybe I’d get the chance to eat Senjogahara’s cooking for dinner, she didn’t even hint at it. When I casually brought up feeling hungry, unable to bear it any longer, she sent me on my way with nothing more than, “I see. Then let’s call it a day. I’m sure you remember, but there aren’t many streetlights in this area so do be careful on your way home. See you later, alligator.” Hitagi Senjogahara essentially lived alone because her father often worked late into the night, so she had to know how to cook, but…

She had such a high difficulty rating.

Of course, I didn’t get very hungry anymore, so my complaint was mostly a lie.

In any case.

I needed to think, but this was me we were talking about, someone whose tutor, Senjogahara, didn’t trust to earn an average score, so it wasn’t going to be particularly productive. It was mostly for my own

satisfaction. Now, self-satisfaction did for some matters in the world, but not others, and this was the latter.

So.

Pushing my bike with my right hand and walking, I'd called Hanekawa on her cell. It was eight-thirty at night—whether that's an appropriate hour to call a girl you aren't that close to is a question I couldn't answer, but Hanekawa's reaction suggested that it fell within the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The incarnation of seriousness, a moral paragon, she'd tell me if I were acting out of line.

"Um, Hanekawa. This might go a little long, do you have a minute?"

"Hm? That's fine. I was only doing some light studying."

"……"

Saying that without a hint of sarcasm was what made her a class president among class president elected by the gods themselves.

Light…what sort of studying could she mean?

"Well, okay," I said, "I'll try to keep it as brief as possible… You went to the same middle school as Senjogahara, right? What was it called again—oh, Kiyokaze Public Middle School?"

"Yup, that's it."

"So you must know a girl a year younger than you called Suruga Kanbaru."

"Well yeah, of course? I mean, is there anyone who doesn't? Even you know who she is, don't you? She's the captain of the basketball team, a school-wide star. I've gone with my friends to cheer from the stands at some of her matches."

"No, listen. I'm not talking about now—I wanted to ask about the

middle-school Kanbaru.”

“Hmm? You do? Why?”

“Why not?”

“Huh… Well, it was more or less the same in middle school. She was the star of the basketball team and everyone knew her. It sounds like she was team captain there, too, starting around the second half of her second year. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, um□”

I couldn’t tell her.

I couldn’t say the words.

I couldn’t possibly convince her.

That of all things, that star was, to put it unkindly, stalking me, of all people.

As it was, how much of this I should be babbling about was an issue, but then again we were talking about Hanekawa, so maybe it was okay to share a bit of my predicament. I’d of course fudge certain aspects as needed.

“I heard that she and Senjogahara were friends in middle school□were they?”

“Hmm? No, I think I told you, but it wasn’t like Senjogahara and I had any physical contact to speak of just because we went to the same middle school. She was a celebrity, so frumpy old yours truly just knew about her unilaterally□”

“I’m as moved as ever by your modesty, but if we could put our usual exchanges aside for today□”

“The Valhalla Duo.”

“Wha?”

“You just reminded me. That’s what they were called, the Valhalla Duo. Senjogahara from the track team and Kanbaru from the basketball team.”

“The Valhalla Duo? What does that word mean again, I feel like I’ve heard it somewhere. And why’d they be called that…”

“Kanbaru’s ‘baru’ and Senjogahara’s ‘hara’ gives you ‘Baruhara.’ And Valhalla, from Norse mythology, is the heavenly hall where Odin, the supreme deity, resides and welcomes the spirits of heroes who died in battle. It’s like holy ground for the war god, so□”

“…Ah, Kanbaru’s name starts with the character for ‘god’ and Senjogahara’s with the ones for ‘battlefield.’”

“Thus the Valhalla Duo.”

“Phew…”

You couldn’t hope for a more snug fit.

How some people exercised their wits to come up with a mere nickname… If I were to nitpick, it sounded too pretty, so you could only sigh and actually found yourself in a hard spot, but that’s just the career straight man in me griping.

“Since they were called a duo,” Hanekawa noted, “I assume their relationship at least hadn’t been bad or hostile. Senjogahara was on the track team until right before graduation, so they must have hung out as fellow athletes at the minimum.”

“You really do know everything.”

“I don’t know everything. I just know what I know.”

The same exchange as always.

In any case…I had confirmed their background.

And now that I had—what next?

How would I approach the foreground?

“I know I’ve already asked you this before,” I said, “but when Senjogahara was in middle school…she was nothing like she is now, right?”

“True, she wasn’t. Senjogahara seems to be changing a little bit lately, but she’s still not who she used to be.”

“Oh…”

She was changing.

But only when it came to me.

So—she wasn’t who she used to be.

“I guess she must have been popular with her juniors?”

“Yes, both the boys and the girls. And not just her juniors, you know. Her seniors loved her when she still had seniors, and she was well-regarded by students in her year—”

“Loved by everyone—young or old, male or female.”

“Middle school only lasts for three years, so ‘young or old’ would be an overstatement. But if I had to choose one specific group, then she might have been most popular with girls who were her junior. That’s what you were trying to ask, yes?”

“…I’m glad you’re so observant.”

She was a little too observant, though.

She wasn’t Oshino, but it felt like she saw through me.

“But, Araragi, you like Senjogahara as she is now, regardless of who she was in the past, right?”

“……”

I hoped she knew she was acting just like a fifth grader.

By the way, while we hadn't particularly stated the fact to anyone at all, everyone knew that Senjogahara and I were going out. We weren't openly mocked or excessively teased about it. Senjogahara was considered a mild-mannered model student by our class, so of course she wasn't, and for my part I was simply not the type of classmate who attracted that kind of behavior. But even so, the entire situation was common knowledge, a tacit understanding.

Rumors were scary things.

It must have taken the rumor a little bit of time, at least, to hop the wall between third-year and second-year students and reach Kanbaru… Well, when you considered that Senjogahara was a celebrity together with the fact that she weighed on Kanbaru's mind, it had taken quite a while, but that's how it is between different years.

"Araragi, I know I've told you this over and over, but keep your relationship proper and platonic. Watch out so there won't be any indecent rumors. Senjogahara seems like a serious girl, though, and I doubt your relationship will turn crass."

"Serious, huh…"

Come to think of it, Hanekawa still didn't know the real Senjogahara… Our other classmates were one thing, but deceiving the Amazing Class President Hanekawa, who knew we'd be going out before we actually did□Senjogahara, too, was a formidable player. In that respect, you could say she was showing me a side of herself she showed no one else… Hmm, but that didn't make me particularly happy. That's not what being a unique exception is supposed to mean.

But really, that was more or less the state of our relationship. She wouldn't even cook for me, so how could our relationship ever become

sleazy?

……

Oh.

If she was rebuffed—then regardless of how it had been in middle school, Kanbaru knew Senjogahara's true nature quite well. If she was coming up to talk to me anyway, then she—

"Senjogahara is a tough one, okay?" Hanekawa said suddenly.

When she did—I recalled that she'd said something similar to me in the past, too. This was Hanekawa talking, of course, so it couldn't be about Hitagi Senjogahara's challenge rating.

"Not that I'm some kind of expert," Hanekawa continued, "but she's created an impregnable force field around herself like in a game."

"……"

"And you're someone else with one, Araragi. Everyone has one around them, putting aside how strong it is—call it a sense of privacy—but you and Senjogahara have built fortresses where you've holed up. People like that find human interaction annoying in general. Rings a bell, doesn't it?"

"Are you talking about me? Or about Senjogahara?"

"Both of you."

"Well, yeah."

Of course.

But in that case.

"Still, Araragi, not liking to deal with people and not liking people are two different things."

"What? Aren't they the same?"

"'Annoyances come / In forms none greater than that / Of the

visitor'…" recited Hanekawa in a calm and quiet voice, "'But then of course I speak not / Of yourself, my esteem'd friend'… I don't care how bad you are at literature, Araragi, you must get what that poem is saying, right? And what I'm trying to say?"

"…I get it."

I couldn't reply any other way.

I did resent being treated like a child, though.

Even so□all I could do was thank her.

"Thanks. Sorry for wasting your time with this nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense. It's normal for you to want to learn more about your special someone."

Hanekawa actually said that.

She didn't think twice about saying something so embarrassing.

A class president among class presidents, indeed.

"But," she added, "I think it's better not to go digging around your lover's past too much. Don't let it turn into fun and games. Stay within limits."

Having put one last fat point on it, she appended a "Bye, then," and fell silent.

I was puzzled as to why she said bye but didn't hang up, until I remembered how she'd taught me over spring break that the etiquette was for the caller to do so.

Oh, what a frighteningly correct girl…

Thinking such thoughts, I told her, "Bye, see you tomorrow at school," and pressed the button to end the call. I folded my cell phone and put it in my back pocket.

So, now what.

As someone who once stood in the same position and underwent the same kind of experience as Senjogahara, I of course understood her words and deeds to some degree—but I found my sympathies lying with Kanbaru.

If possible—I thought.

If only.

It would be a needless intervention, an overstepping of bounds, an unsolicited favor—Senjogahara had revealed her eccentric philosophy to me whereby generosity was an act of aggression, and this didn't even smack of generosity.

After all, part of it was my own underhanded calculation. A motive so conceited that I balked at the thought, let alone expressing it.

But I couldn't help but think—

I wanted Senjogahara to get back what she'd lost.

I wanted Senjogahara to pick up what she'd thrown away.

Why?

Because those were things I could never do—

"Asking Oshino about this wouldn't do any good… That jolly idiot probably doesn't give a damn about aftercare and following up. Not that I'm one to talk… Wait, hold on."

Important but forgotten details often come back in a flash for no reason whatsoever, and that was exactly what had happened. I opened the zipper of the Boston bag hanging off my shoulder and checked inside. I didn't need to in order to find out, but I was hoping against hope. Sure enough—the envelope I received from Senjogahara wasn't inside.

The envelope containing Oshino's fee for services rendered.

"I left it on that cushion next to me… Ugh, what now?"

This was about money, so it was best taken care of at the earliest convenience, but there was no need to feel that rushed, and I could get it from Senjogahara when I saw her at school the next day, but…what to do? Though I doubted it, I couldn't rule out the possibility that I'd put it in one of my pockets and that it had fallen out without me noticing as I walked talking on the phone with Hanekawa, so maybe I should call Senjogahara and make sure, just in case… No.

I was pushing my bike alongside me as I walked, so I couldn't have covered that much distance. If I biked my way back to the Tamikura Apartments, I would be there in no time. In that case, the right course of action was to go back immediately to get it. There was the risk that I'd end up having to meet Senjogahara's father considering how late it was, but the probability seemed negligible given what I'd heard about how hard he worked.

Sure, a phone call would get the job done just the same, but I wanted to see Senjogahara as often as I could.

Not that I knew how to take the initiative.

I could be forgiven for acting at least a little like her boyfriend.

"Okay, then."

I straddled my bike seat, turned around□

And wondered if it had started to rain.

Not because a drop of water hit my cheek or anything, but because of what I saw right in front of me after turning my bike around□a

human figure, right in front of me as if it had been tailing me the whole time, entered my vision.

A human figure.

Dressed in a raincoat from head to toe.

It wore its hood deep.

Black rubber boots…and a pair of rubber gloves.

If it were raining, the outfit would provide perfect protection from the weather…but though I opened my palm, I didn't feel a single drop after all.

The stars were in the sky.

We were in a rural town some ways from a provincial city□so other than a few shreds of clouds, nothing in the night sky was so boorish as to challenge the starlight.

"…Um."

Oh…

I knew… I knew what was going on here… I knew it well, very well. It was what had played out during spring break, what I had experienced more than enough of…

Yet I couldn't wipe the smirk, a completely inappropriate expression for the occasion, off of my face. The sensation was so familiar that I nearly felt a pang of nostalgia, oddly enough. I recalled my experience with Hanekawa during Golden Week as well.

If there was an issue here…it was that unlike during spring break, my body was no longer immortal and that I wasn't a vampire.

It was no time for me to be keeping my cool…but cool was exactly what I needed to be to discern it and its nature. You could say that over the past few months, I had become a little accustomed, inured□

To dealing with aberrations.

…I hoped it was a physically harmless aberration like the one on Mother's Day, Hachikuji's snail…but my instincts told me that I had to flee. No, not my instincts, but the vestigial instincts of a legendary vampire that surely nested somewhere inside my body□

I tried to turn my bicycle back around□but in the heat of the moment, decided to dive off it and tumble to the ground.

It was the correct decision□in exchange, however, I lost my oh-so-precious mountain bike for good. Raincoat leaped in my direction too fast for my eyes to follow and punched, with its left fist, the center of my mountain bike's handlebars just as I jumped out of the way□crushing and denting my bike and sending it flying like a weightless scrap of paper caught in a raging tornado. By the time it slammed into a telephone pole and fell to the ground, the object formerly known as a mountain bike had lost any traces of its original form.

If I hadn't dodged□it would have been me.

I bet?

The wind pressure generated by the fist was enough to tear my clothes. My Boston bag's straps snapped, too, and it fell from my shoulder to thud at my feet.

"…I-It's on a different level."

Even my smirk□vanished from my face.

I'd only been on the periphery of its attack, and I couldn't believe its intimidating presence… It may not have rivaled a legendary vampire but was impressive enough to bear comparison…an aberration that brought bodily terror in its wake.

Forget about Mother's Day.

This was, without question, spring break.

I'd lost my bike.

Could I still run away, on foot?

At least from what I'd seen of Raincoat's moves… Well, I didn't actually see them, but judging by its invisibly quick moves, getting away on foot was impossible.

Plus.

Even if it was to run away, I didn't want to turn my back on this aberration—nothing felt scarier than turning my back on Raincoat, taking my eyes off of it. My fear was irrevocable, primordial.

So I take back what I just said.

You never become accustomed to such a sensation.

You don't get inured no matter how many times you undergo such an experience.

You don't even want to remember.

Raincoat twirled around towards me. Its hooded face made it difficult to read its expression—in fact, rather than an expression, what was there was akin to a deep pit. It was dark—so dark that I couldn't see a thing.

Like it had been chipped out from this world.

Like it had been left out of this world.

Then, Raincoat stepped towards me.

Its left fist.

It came too fast for my reflexes alone to dodge—but it described a perfectly straight line like the blow that had destroyed my mountain

bike, so I was prepared to react at the first sign of motion and was able to evade it again, by an inch—and the left fist that I'd evaded penetrated the concrete-block wall behind me like it was nothing. It was almost like a catapult launch.

While stunned by its hilarious destructive potential, I thought I'd be able to use the time lag to regain my stance as Raincoat pulled its left hand out of the wall, since it was like a monkey with its closed hand stuck inside a jar, but no, of course not, things weren't going to be that convenient, and Raincoat wasn't giving me a few seconds. As if a dam were collapsing around a leak, a dozen feet of the concrete-block wall crumbled and fell with a tremendous clatter.

That took me back.

So, no time lag.

Raincoat seemed to twist its entire body around as its left fist came right at me—this time there was no sign, no initial motion, only a determined attempt to punch me from its current position.

A catapult.

Forget about evading it, I couldn't even defend against it.

I didn't even know where it hit me.

A moment later, my world began to spin, then again, three times, four, and as if my thought processes were being scrambled, intense G's assaulted me every which way, up and down, left and right, and the world began to warp and bend before I was slammed prone against the asphalt.

I learned what it might feel like for my entire body to be grated.

I felt like a block of cheese getting turned to curly shreds.

Yet—it hurt.

And if it hurt, I was still alive.

My body hurt from head to toe, but my abdomen most of all—I must have been punched in the gut. I tried to stand up in a panic, but my legs trembled and shook so much it was all I could do to go from prone to supine.

Raincoat was awfully far away. It looked that way. I thought it was some optical illusion—but no, it really was far away. That one blow seemed to have sent me flying an incredible distance. It truly was a catapult.

My innards—felt yucky.

The pain I was feeling…I'd felt before.

It wasn't my bones.

A number of my organs had ruptured.

While they may have been destroyed, the *shape* of my body was, you could say, fine. Right, bicycles and humans were made different, so even if they took the same punch, one of them didn't turn into a crumpled piece of paper. Nice one, joints. Viva muscles.

Having said that…

I couldn't move thanks to the damage I'd taken.

And Raincoat was approaching me—this time at a relaxed pace, slow enough for me to see it clearly and for its figure to be burned into my brain. Perhaps one more shot, and if not, two or three more and it would all be over—in other words, there was no need for it to feel hurried or impatient now.

That did make sense. It was a reasonable decision.

But…what was going on?

This aberration was practically a thrill killer… It was clear by now that, no matter how humanoid in shape, it wasn't "human" given its power to crush a bicycle and smash through a concrete-block wall□but why was this aberration attacking me?

For every aberration, there was a reason.

They weren't just cryptic.

They were rational□grounded in reason.

That was the most valuable thing I'd learned from Oshino, and from my time with the gorgeous vampiress□thus, the logical conclusion was that there was a reason for this aberration, too, yet I couldn't think of anything□

What was the cause?

I thought back to the day's events.

I thought back to whom I'd seen.

Mayoi Hachikuji.

Hitagi Senjogahara.

Tsubasa Hanekawa□

My two little sisters, my homeroom teacher, my classmates whose faces were fuzzy, and…

As I was coming up with names in no particular order□

I remembered Suruga Kanbaru's at the tail end.

"……!"

Just then□Raincoat turned around.

Its humanoid body turned a perfect 180 degrees.

No sooner than it did, it took off in a dash□

And vanished.

It was so sudden that I found myself at a loss for words.

“Wh…Whaa?”

Why would it do that all of a sudden?

I looked up at the sky as the pain that reigned over my body turned from dull to sharp—and the starlight was still beautiful. It was such a discordant sight given the faint smell of blood wafting in the air from all over my body.

My mouth was filled with the thick taste of blood.

Yes, my organs were definitely wounded. My guts had been vigorously churned. But it shouldn’t be enough to kill me… And I wouldn’t even need to go to the hospital. Though my body may no longer be immortal, I still retain a modicum of regen capabilities. A night’s rest would have me back up and running. So I’d managed to escape with my life barely intact…

But…

Suddenly, and for no particular reason, I recalled the moment before I was hit. Raincoat’s left fist was aimed in my direction—I had a flashback focused on that fist, and that fist alone. Maybe it was when it punched my bike, or maybe when its fist went through the wall, but the friction of the blow must have destroyed the rubber glove, opening up a line of four holes at the base of its fingers—and just like the inside of Raincoat’s hood, they seemed somehow chipped out, left out, hollow, but.

The contents of that gloved fist.

It belonged to some kind of beast—

“Araragi,” I heard a voice call from above me.

A flat voice, so cold it was below freezing.

When I looked toward it, I met an equally cold, emotionless gaze□it was Hitagi Senjogahara.

“…Hey, long time no see,” I said.

“Yes, it’s been a while.”

It had been less than an hour.

“I’m here to give you something you forgot.” With those words, she shoved the envelope in her right hand in front of my eyes. She didn’t have to bring it so close, I could see that it was the envelope containing the hundred thousand yen fee she was paying Oshino. “Brazenly forgetting something I handed to you is a capital crime, Araragi,” she scolded me.

“Yeah…sorry.”

“Apologize all you want, I’m not forgiving you. I came here so that I could bully you to my heart’s content, but it looks like you’ve already punished yourself. Quite an admirable show of loyalty, Araragi.”

“Listen, I’m not one of those guys into punishing myself…”

“You don’t have to hide it. In light of your loyalty, I’ll half-forgive you.”

“……”

She was lessening my sentence but not absolving me.

The Senjogahara Court seemed to be tough on crime.

“Joking aside,” she said, “what happened, did you get hit by a car? I see that precious thing you called your bicycle over there, and it looks like it’s been heavily damaged. Or rather, it’s sticking out from a telephone pole. A convoy would have had to run over you for it to end

up like that."

"Umm…"

"You remember its license-plate number, I hope? I'll go and avenge you. I'll start by turning the car into scrap metal, and then I'll put the driver through so much pain he'll be begging for me to finish him by running him over and over with a bicycle."

Hitagi Senjogahara never hesitated to say the most alarming things.

I was relieved that she was the same as always. I had to admit, though, it felt both weird and amusing that Senjogahara's acid tongue was making me feel alive…

"…No, I just tripped and fell. I need to watch where I'm going… I was pedaling my bike while I was on the phone…and slammed into a telephone pole…"

"Did you, now. Okay then, would you like me to destroy that pole at the very least?"

She just wanted to vent her anger.

It wasn't even a misbegotten grudge.

"Please don't. I'm sure the neighbors around here would be annoyed if you did…"

"Okay, then… But you know, Araragi, you have a very flexible body if you were able to slam into that concrete-block wall hard enough to break it and only come away with a few cuts and scrapes. I'm impressed. Maybe someday you'll actually be able to make good use of that flexibility. Oh, I could call an ambulance, but…I guess you don't need one?"

"Nah…"

Had Senjogahara gone through the trouble of bringing that

envelope because, like me, she wanted us to meet as often as possible? Maybe she'd meant to take the bus to bring the letter to my house. If so, it still wasn't enough to make her a real tsundere, but I could almost feel elated…

Also, she'd saved me.

However unexpectedly.

Because Raincoat must have noticed Senjogahara and vanished as a result.

"If I just rest a little longer," I said, "I'll be able to move."

"Oh. Okay, I'll reward you with a very special something."

Stride

Senjogahara stepped one foot over and across my face-up head. I'd like to reiterate, her outfit that day featured a long skirt. She had stockingless, smooth, slender, bare legs and now, from where I was lying, the length of her skirt didn't matter so much.

"Enjoy it until you can move again."

"……"

To be honest, I could have gotten up already but I decided to take the opportunity to think some things through. Not that thinking was a productive activity for me…but for the time being.

For the time being, I thought about Senjogahara.

And about tomorrow.

Suruga Kanbaru's home was about thirty minutes away by bike from the front gates of our school. It was also about thirty minutes away on foot if you dashed the whole way. At first I tried telling Kanbaru to get on the back of my bike so we could ride together, but she demurred. It's dangerous for two people to ride on one bicycle, and it's against the law to begin with, she said. Well, I couldn't argue with that, and perhaps she was reluctant because getting on the back meant holding on to me the whole way. In that case, I thought, I could push my bike and walk alongside her or leave it at school, but Kanbaru told me not to worry about her and to ride. Then what's she gonna do, I wondered, until she told me, like it was the most natural thing, "Okay, let me show you the way," and dashed off on her two feet. This was just as true now as when she stalked me, but for Suruga Kanbaru, "dashing" seemed to be a mode of transportation just like "by foot, bike, car, or train." This seemed unusual to me, even for jocks. *Tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup,* Kanbaru's sharp and lively rhythm went as she guided my bike with the white bandage on her left hand. When we arrived at our destination, her breathing completely unperturbed, she had somehow only worked up a small sweat.

It was an impressive Japanese home.

I could practically feel the history coming from it.

I knew that it must have been her home from the nameplate reading "Kanbaru" on the gate, but the premises had an air of solemnity about them that gave me pause nevertheless.

Still, I was going to go inside.

I intruded on the premises with the same indescribable feeling that overcame me when I visited a shrine or a temple on a school field trip, and after we walked down a hallway that faced a traditional courtyard, bamboo-pipe fountain and all, I was shown into Kanbaru's room beyond a sliding paper-screen door.

…As I looked around, I wondered how she could have allowed in a senior whom she didn't even know that well.

Her futon hadn't been folded up; her clothes were strewn across the floor (including her underwear); many books, be it textbooks, novels, or manga, lay open face-down on the floor; a mountain of cardboard boxes that belonged in a warehouse stood in one corner; and worst of all, her trash didn't sit inside a waste basket but was left carelessly all over the tatami mats, packed into plastic bags from her neighborhood supermarket or just as-is. In fact, the room seemed to lack any container burdened with the quaint notion of holding trash.

It should have felt spacious, at over two hundred square feet.

But there was nowhere to take even a first step.

"I apologize for the mess."

Suruga Kanbaru said this briskly with an innocent smile on her face, her right hand on her chest. Maybe the words were fitting for the occasion, but I'd always thought of them as a modest disclaimer you uttered upon inviting someone into a room that was at least somewhat tidy.

What's flooded on top and in blazes on the bottom?

Well said, actually.

Oh god…

There were even some hygiene products…

I reflexively looked down at my feet.

If I didn't, I might find plenty of things that would be even worse to see. Self-confidence is a good thing, but being shameless is something else, Suruga Kanbaru…

Oh.

That applied to Senjogahara too, didn't it…

True, there wasn't a speck of dust to be found in Senjogahara's room… Still, she'd had a major influence on Kanbaru back in middle school not limited to her personality, and it just seemed to have ruined Kanbaru's character, if anything.

"There's no need to be modest," my hostess urged. "You're hesitating to enter the room of a girl you don't know well, which speaks to your delicacy, which I find rather charming, but I don't think this is the time for that."

"…Kanbaru."

"Yes?"

"I'm very aware of the fact that this isn't the time for it, but… please, I have a request for you."

"Sure thing. Whatever you want. I'm in no place to turn down any from you."

"I just want an hour, no, thirty minutes… Just give me some time to clean this room up. Also, give me a big garbage bag."

I didn't see myself as a clean freak…and it wasn't like my room was particularly tidy, either, but this was just awful…cruel, even. Kanbaru seemed confused, as if she didn't have a clue as to what I was talking about, but that must have also meant that she had no real reason to

refuse. With an “Okay, then,” she went to get me a garbage bag.

Fast forward.

Well, actually.

The disaster that was Kanbaru’s room wasn’t, of course, something that could be rectified in thirty short minutes, not to mention that at the end of the day, this was the room of a girl I didn’t know that well, which meant that while I could grab some things, there were others that I couldn’t touch for ethical and moral reasons. So pretty much all I did was gather up the scattered trash and tidy up her books and magazines (or so I say, but with no bookshelves in Kanbaru’s room, I simply stacked them up according to size). It was a halfhearted attempt, like sweeping a circle in her square room, but even so, once I folded up her futon and stored it in her closet and folded up her clothes and put them in a corner (she didn’t have hangers, let alone a dresser), the sight became bearable, or at least, there was enough space for Kanbaru and I to sit facing each other and talk.

“Incredible, my senior Araragi. So that’s the color of my floor mats. I wonder how many years it’s been since I last glimpsed them.”

“You’re counting in years…”

“I’m grateful.”

“…Once this is settled, let’s take a full day…no, I’ll even stay over to spend multiple days cleaning up this room. Next time I’ll bring a full set of serious cleaning supplies, like liquid cleaner and spot remover, okay?”

“Sorry for making you fuss over me. Basketball is about the only thing I’m good at, and cleaning up or tidying up or finishing up or whatever it’s called isn’t my forte.”

“……”

She was wearing such a broad, self-assured smile that I didn’t know what to say… During those thirty minutes, she’d stood idle and absentminded in the hallway and shown no signs of helping out. I didn’t think she was lazy or slovenly, only really that inept at tidying up her room, but still, though it was none of my business, the sight had been one to hide, at all costs, to be withheld, absolutely, from the eyes of students at our school who considered her a star. She hadn’t invited any of her classmates here, had she? Friends were one thing, but if she invited one of her club juniors, she ran the risk of traumatizing them. Among the many things I’d stuffed into the garbage bag were crushed soda cans, candy wrappers, and empty instant noodle cups… What was an athlete on the national level doing eating and drinking that stuff?

I knew that a quirk or two could actually cause a celebrity to be more likable, but this was going too far no matter how you looked at it. Try as you might, you wouldn’t find such a character adorable…

“Okay, then□”

It was tomorrow.

The day after Friday, in other words.

Saturday.

While most of society has long taken the two-day weekend for granted, Naoetsu High, the private prep school of note that we attend, regularly holds classes even on Saturdays. Even after tomorrow turned to today, not having arrived at any kind of conclusion, I used the break between first and second periods to head to the building for second-years. I was going to be talking to a famous star, so there was no need for me to look up her class. Class 2-2. While the other kids were abuzz

that a third-year had visited them (a familiar yet fresh feeling for someone like me who no longer had senior schoolmates), Kanbaru□being Suruga Kanbaru□walked up to me with a majestic gait as I waited in the hallway.

“Hello there, my senior Araragi.”

“Hey, Kanbaru. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“I see. In that case,” Kanbaru replied, no questions asked, as if everything had been worked out in advance, “please come with me to my home after school.”

And□

There I was at her home, the Japanese mansion.

There was no need to go all the way there if all we were going to do was talk. We could have done so in an empty classroom, on the roof, on the athletic grounds, or even at a nearby fast food restaurant if we had to do it off campus, and I’d told her as much, but Kanbaru seemed to want to do it at her home for a reason.

If she had a reason, I’d oblige.

I wasn’t going to ask.

“So,” she said, “where should we begin? Of course, as you can tell, I’m not much of a conversationalist so I’m not sure how this is supposed to go, but first things first.” Kanbaru re-crossed her legs and bowed her head. “I’d like to apologize for what happened last night.”

“Yeah…” I’d recovered in a day’s time□though I might have felt some lingering pain in my stomach, which I rubbed for a moment before nodding. “So that was you, after all.”

The raincoat.

Rubber gloves, rubber boots.

They had been among the clothes that I'd just finished putting away.

Needless to say.

"'After all,' huh," Kanbaru echoed me. "I don't know how to feel sometimes when I hear you speak. You're so humble. You saw straight through it, didn't you? You wouldn't have come to me otherwise."

"Not really…I was just guessing. Based on your build, your outline, your silhouette, that kind of thing. I added filters, like people who were aware that I was paying Senjogahara a visit for a study session, and ran a search, so to speak… And if I went to you and I was wrong, I'd just be wrong. It's not like there would be an issue."

"Hmm, I see. How astute of you." Kanbaru sounded genuinely impressed. "I've heard that some boys can identify a girl by the shape of her hips. Was that it?"

"Not even close!" How could I when she was wearing a raincoat?!

"I apologize. I hadn't meant to do that."

Kanbaru bowed her head again.

To me she seemed sincere.

But if she hadn't meant to…then what had she been up to? It was clearly an attempt on my… Or was that not the case, either?

"Well," I said, "apologies are great, but what I wanted to hear was your reason. Actually we can put aside the reason."

Her reason.

It wasn't that I had no clue.

I wasn't going out of my way to say it now, but it was the very bit, the hint that pointed to Raincoat being none other than Kanbaru.

But□

“In any case, that power, that abnormal power□”

Abnormal power.

Aberration.

It crumpled my bike like paper.

It demolished a concrete-block wall with a single strike.

It took a human and□

“That’s what I want to ask about,” I continued. “What, exactly, did you…”

“Hrmm. I was wondering where to begin, but that would be where, I suppose. Fine… But first, I’d like to ask if you’re the type of person who can accept the absurd.”

“The absurd?”

That must have meant□oh, right. Of course.

Kanbaru didn’t know about my body. About my once-immortal body□while she had dealt me significant damage the night before, I didn’t heal so quickly you could see it taking place, so of course she didn’t know. Thus her preface□but wait, no.

Even if Kanbaru didn’t know about me, she knew about Senjogahara, having learned her absurd secret before me. And□as her boyfriend, I had to know the absurd secret, in Kanbaru’s mind□in other words, maybe she was sounding me out at that very moment.

“Did that not make sense?” she asked me. “My question is whether or not you’re able to believe what you see with your own eyes.”

“I only believe what I see with my own eyes. Which is why I’ve believed everything I’ve seen. Naturally, that goes for Senjogahara, too.”

“…Oh, so you even figured that out.” Without a hint of guilt or

shame at my remark, however, Kanbaru continued, “But. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. It’s not like I’ve been following you around recently because I want to learn more about her.”

“Huh? You weren’t?”

I’d been completely convinced of that.

She was trying to confirm the rumor that Koyomi Araragi and Hitagi Senjogahara were going out wasn’t she? And then, when she heard that I was going to Senjogahara’s home for a one-on-one study session, she felt certain didn’t she?

Well, I was probably right about that.

My read wasn’t mistaken, but was there a separate reason for the stalking?

“You and Senjogahara were called the Valhalla Duo as the basketball star and the track star, I’ve come to understand.”

“Yes, exactly. I’m impressed you know that much, I underestimated you. I thought I’d praised you as much as I could, but it looks like I still fell short. I could never measure your greatness with my own piddling values. The more I get to know you, the further away you feel.”

“…Someone told me, that’s all.”

Despite all her flowery praise, she wasn’t coming across as a sycophant or brownnoser to me, which in a way made her a work of art.

“How it was derived, too,” I added. “It’s a really well thought-out moniker.”

“Isn’t it? I came up with it myself.”

Kanbaru puffed her chest out with pride.

…She’d thought of it herself.

I hadn’t felt so heartsick in a while…

“I thought about it for the longest time before coming up with that one. By the way, I also came up with a personal nickname for myself, ‘Li’l Suruga Can-do,’ but that one didn’t stick, unfortunately.”

“I’m feeling very disappointed, too.”

“Oh, so you sympathize?”

Yes. On account of your poor sensibility.

“You’re such a compassionate senior. Of course, now that I say it out loud, it was a little long to use as a nickname. I can see why it never caught on.”

“If we’re gonna postgame it, that was the least of your errors.”

Kanbaru seemed to have been surrounded by wonderful people in middle school.

Including Senjogahara back in those days…

“Anyway, yes,” she said. “Putting aside the Valhalla Duo, perhaps I’ll only annoy you by spelling things out considering how perceptive you are, but in middle school Senjogahara and I were□no, before I go into that, there’s something I want to show you. That’s why I asked you to spare some of your valuable time to trek all the way here.”

“You want to show me something? Oh, I get it. That something was at home, and that’s why we couldn’t talk at school or just anywhere.”

“No, that’s not it. It’d stand out at school, or maybe you could say I was afraid of people seeing it… I’d prefer it if no one else did.”

Saying so□Kanbaru began to unwind the white bandage on her left hand. She undid the clasp holding it wrapped around her arm, and methodically, starting with her fingers□

It came back to me.

The night before.

It had destroyed my bike, smashed through the concrete-block wall, and ruptured my organs□

It had been the doing of a left hand balled into a fist.

“To be honest, I don’t really want people seeing this. After all, I’m a girl.”

She unwound the entire bandage□and rolled up the sleeve of her uniform. What I saw there was Kanbaru’s girlish, slender, soft-looking upper arm, and connected to it from the elbow down□a bony left hand covered in thick, black hair you’d expect to see on *a wild beast*.

It had peeked through the holes worn through the rubber glove.

The scent□of a beast.

“Well, this is how it is.”

“……”

Could it have been an odd-looking glove or hand puppet□no, clearly not. It was far too long and thin□and anyway, apart from how it looked, I had witnessed something *similar* though *not quite the same* for certain over Golden Week□so I knew.

That it was nothing but an aberration.

An aberration.

I called it a wild beast□but I’d be hard-pressed to say what kind. It felt like it could be any animal, but also like no animal in existence. While it looked like everything, it seemed to belong to nothing. But if I had to say, given the five reasonably long fingers and the shape of the nails extending past them, only if I had to say□

Although I don’t think it’s a very appropriate way to describe a girl’s body part.

“A monkey’s paw.”

Those were my words.

“It looks like a monkey’s paw.”

An ape as in the general term to describe any non-human primate.

“Huh.”

For some reason Kanbaru was looking at me with admiration.

Then, she smacked her knee and said, “I knew it. It is impossible, after all, to measure just how discerning those eyes of yours are. I’m stunned, it’s like they work in a completely different way. You were able to figure out what this is at a single glance. I’m simply amazed. There’s no comparing the knowledge you possess to the resources of a plebeian mind like mine that must mean there’s no need for me to explain anything else.”

“H-Hey, don’t feel convinced all on your own!”

No way I could let her stop explaining now.

She might as well have hung me out to dry.

I told her, “I just said the first thing that came to mind. I haven’t discerned a thing.”

“Really? That’s the title of a short story by William Wymark Jacobs ‘The Monkey’s Paw.’ The theme of the monkey’s paw has been used so many times in all kinds of media that it’s been spun off into different patterns ”

“Never heard of it,” I confessed.

Oh, Kanbaru said. “That you would utter the truth without knowing makes me wonder if you enjoy some celestial being’s blessing. Intuiting the essence, no logic required!”

“…Well, my intuition does enjoy a little bit of a reputation.”

“I knew it. And now I’m proud of myself. I’m nowhere on your

level, of course, but to the extent that I laid store in you, my intuition was spot-on."

"Oh, really…"

If you asked me, her sights were misaligned.

Um, I said, looking at Kanbaru's left hand again. A beast's hand—a monkey's paw. "C-Can I touch it?"

"Yup. It's fine *for now.*"

"O-Oh…"

With her permission, I brought my hand close to her wrist—and touched it gently.

Timidly, fearfully.

The texture, the flesh…the heat, the pulse.

It was alive.

So this aberration—*was a living aberration* after all.

…So even Suruga Kanbaru, who had no issue with me seeing her room in that state, did mind showing people this left arm of hers… What she'd said about spraining it while doing solo workouts was nothing more than talk. The bandage wasn't to protect her injury but a way to hide her arm… And yes, I'd found it a little strange that she didn't disfavor the left side of her body despite the sprain…but I guess it's not very convincing of me to say that after the fact.

Then again.

It made sense she wasn't able to play basketball with that left hand.

Without thinking.

Squeeze—I tightened my hand around her wrist.

"Mm, ahh, no," she moaned.

"Stop with that weird voice!"

Without thinking, I let go.

“But you were touching me in a weird way,” she objected.

“I wasn’t touching you in any weird way.”

“I’m ticklish.”

“Okay, but that’s no reason for you to moan in a way that contradicts your character so far…”

When I thought about it, Senjogahara had pulled the same trick a few times. It had to be in a diametrically opposite way from her current self, but if Kanbaru had it down too, then Senjogahara’s repertoire included it since middle school…

“Kanbaru, just in case you’ve forgotten, this is your home and your room, okay? What do you think is going to happen to me if your parents heard you moaning like that?”

“Oh, that’s okay,” she replied jovially. “You don’t need to worry about them, at all.”

“…Fine, then.”

Huh?

Why was she saying that like she didn’t want me to bring up the topic, like she was openly refusing to pursue it any further? While her tone was as upbeat as ever, it really did seem out of character.

So anyway, Kanbaru rushed to get us back on track, opening and closing her left hand. “As you can see, it moves like I want it to right now□but there are also times when it won’t. No, I guess you might say there are times it moves like I don’t want it to□”

“Like you don’t want it to?”

“Want, or hope□hmm, what’s the right word. It’s hard to say. I

guess it would be when I'm trying to explain something that I don't understand very well myself… However. It was me who attacked you last night, it was definitely me□yet I barely remember a thing. It was like a waking dream, or maybe a reverie□it's not like I don't remember anything at all, but it felt like I was watching something on television, like I couldn't step in□"

"A trance," I interrupted her explanation. "You were in a trance□that's what it's called. I know all about it… Aberrations that possess humans come in and have their way with your mind and body."

That wasn't the case with me□but it was in Hanekawa's, the occurrence with Tsubasa Hanekawa's cat. That's why she remembered practically nothing about what happened over Golden Week, when she came into contact with an aberration. As a case, this one seemed close□there'd been a similar type of phenomenon where Hanekawa's body transformed, too□

"You know a lot," Kanbaru admired. "So that's what this is called, an aberration□"

"I'm not particularly well-informed, though. It's just that I've had a lot of experiences with them lately for whatever reason, and there's someone who is well-informed about them□"

Oshino.

This□was right up his alley.

It was Oshino's domain.

"□that I met."

"Okay. Well, I'm fortunate you're so broadminded. We wouldn't be able to talk if you ran away the moment I showed you this arm. And I would feel hurt. More than a little."

“Luckily, you see, I’ve gotten used to dealing with the absurd, so don’t worry. The absurd…meaning Senjogahara, too□of course.”

At this rate, I should tell her later about how I got involved with an aberration myself and temporarily turned into a vampire… From an accountability standpoint, maybe I needed to tell her now, but there were still too many unknowns about the aberration that was Kanbaru’s left hand for that.

“Still, I was a little surprised,” I shared. “You made me hiccup, as my fifth-grade friend would say. But since you’ve started with the most surprising part, I’m confident that nothing else you tell me will shock me.”

“Ah. Of course, that’s why I had you look at my arm first. We’ve cleared the biggest hurdle from the get-go. All right, to business, then.”

With a smile Kanbaru went on.

“I’m a lesbian.”

“……”

I fell over in shock.

Like in a Fujiko Fujio comic.

“Oh, I see,” Kanbaru mumbled at my reaction. “Maybe I was a little too blunt, given that you’re a man. Umm…” She cocked her head. “Allow me to correct myself. I’m a sapphist.”

“It’s the same thing!”

I had yelled, in an attempt to keep myself grounded.

Huh? What? So, what did that mean?

Is that why she and Senjogahara were the Valhalla Duo back in middle school? A year apart, were they? Senjogahara calling her “that

kid”? Hunh? Is that what she meant the day before when she said she’d never broken up with a boy?

“Oh, it’s not like that. I only had a crush on her, there was nothing the other way around. To me, she was purely perfect, a senior I could look up to. I was content just to bask in her presence.”

“Content just to bask in her presence…”

That sounded nice.

That really did sound nice. But.

An unrequited crush, she’d gone ahead and told me…

Hachikuji, I thought, the woman in you led you in a completely wrong direction… No, I needed to calm down. I couldn’t reject stuff out of prejudice… Right… Maybe this is how girls were these days. Maybe my worldview was dated. Maybe I needed to be less serious and more liberal.

“I see, a sapphist… All right, then.”

“Yes, a sapphist.”

Kanbaru looked happy for whatever reason.

Be that as it may…

Whether it was vampires, cats, crabs, or snails, class presidents, always-ill girls, or grade schoolers, cat ears or tsunderes or lost children, or even sapphists, the world was, how should I put it, full of new challenges, or maybe insatiable.

It was a free-for-all.

Did Senjogahara know that about her? Probably not, given the way Kanbaru had said it. But whether she did or not, I doubted it concerned a middle-school Senjogahara very much.

The star of the track team and the star of the basketball team.

The Valhalla Duo.

“She was popular with everyone,” Kanbaru related, “but I’m pretty sure my feelings for her went beyond that. I’m certain of it, in fact. I was even ready to die for her sake. Yes, you could say I wanted her, dead or in love.”

“……”

Uh…what?

I wasn’t sure if that was clever or not.

“Mm,” she hummed. “That came off better than I expected. Pretty inspired of me to play on ‘alive’ and ‘in love,’ if I do say so myself. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Uh huh. I wasn’t sure at first, but now that you’ve explained it to me, I’ve made up my mind.”

It was a bad pun.

Anyway.

I told Kanbaru to go on.

“Go on? I don’t know, it’s not like we’re discussing the past. To speak of continuing, it’s of a piece with the present. I chose Naoetsu High in the first place to chase after her.”

“Yeah… That’s what I assumed after hearing your story. If anything, it all makes better sense.”

I ran the risk of insulting Kanbaru’s teammates all over again depending on how she took it so I kept the words to myself, but a basketball star in middle school should have been able to play in a better environment via an athletic recommendation or something. Yet, for whatever reason, Kanbaru had decided on Naoetsu High, a school that put as good as zero focus on extracurriculars, basketball included.

Why? What could have been her motivation?

Her devotion.

Well, even then, it was all too straightforward.

“I was so taken with her that I would’ve licked a candy that came out of her mouth.”

“……”

Was that an image she ought to be putting into words in front of other people?

“My third year,” she lamented, “the whole year after she graduated, was colored gray.”

“Gray, you say.”

“Yes. A gray Sapphic existence.”

“……”

She really liked that term.

Sure, if that’s what she wanted.

“My gray matter’s gray Sapphic existence,” she said.

“That’s not even remotely clever.”

She was trying too hard to insert jokes into our conversation.

This could stay a tad more serious.

“How strict of you,” she complained. “You’re setting too high a bar for me with your tough standards. It’s strange, though. Knowing that you’re doing it for my own good eases me into accepting them.”

“Uhh… What happened to your gray Sapphic existence next?”

“Yes. That year drove home just how important she’d been for me. That year we were apart may have weighed more on me than the two years we were together. That’s why my plan was to tell her how I felt if I got into Naoetsu High and could meet her again. With that goal, I

spent all of my time studying for entrance exams.”

So said Kanbaru.

She was as full of confidence as ever, but it seemed like her cheeks were flushed. She must have been embarrassed, plain and simple. Uh oh…it was kind of cute. I was busy being confused and bewildered when she was stalking me, but now for the first time I was starting to feel fond of Suruga Kanbaru, my junior. Gosh, a whole new Sapphic-*moé* territory was opening up inside of me…

I found myself barely caring about Kanbaru’s beastly left hand…but no, I knew that was where the meat of this story lay…

“Forget about candy. Gum,” she averred. “I was so taken with her that I would have chewed a piece of gum that came from her mouth.”

“Your standards are a mystery to me…”

There had to be a nicer image.

“But,” Kanbaru said, her tone sagging exaggeratedly, “she had changed from the senior I knew.”

“Ah…”

“She had changed completely.”

A crab.

Hitagi Senjogahara had encountered a crab. She’d lost much, thrown away much, and rid herself of much and she rejected everything. It must have seemed like Hitagi Senjogahara had transformed into a different person altogether for those who’d known her in middle school, like Hanekawa. And for Kanbaru, who had worshiped Senjogahara the transformation must have been too thorough to take.

So thorough it made her doubt what she saw with her own eyes.

“I had heard that she became seriously ill after entering high school and that she had quit running because of how protracted it was. I knew that much coming in. But I never imagined she could have changed that much. I thought it was all a bunch of nasty rumors.”

Seriously ill, eh…

Well, she wasn’t wrong to look at it that way… Ultimately, Senjogahara had a chronic condition that still dogged her.

“But I was wrong. Those rumors were so off the mark that they didn’t even scratch the surface. Something far worse had happened to her body. I noticed and I thought I had to do something. I had to save my senior. How could I not? She was really good to me when I was in middle school, and I’ve never forgotten it. We may have been in different years and on different teams, but she was extremely generous.”

“That generosity…”

That generosity what had it meant to Senjogahara? But this wasn’t the time to speak or inquire about it, was it?

“And that’s why I tried to save her I wanted to. But I couldn’t even begin to approach her. She refused.”

“Ah…”

It seemed like too much to expect her to tell me exactly how. She was probably covering for Senjogahara… Kanbaru would never speak a single bad word about her, no matter what.

Yes, it wasn’t hard to guess that she’d had something just as bad, if not worse, done to her… Frankly speaking, I didn’t care to know.

For my sake, and for Kanbaru’s.

For Senjogahara’s sake, too.

Stapler.

“I thought I could do something.” Despite an air of chagrin, of regretting it from the bottom of her heart—Kanbaru was forcing herself to sound calm and collected. “I thought I could do something about whatever she was burdened with. Even if I couldn’t get rid of the cause, even if I couldn’t relieve her symptoms, I could be by her side—and heal her heart.”

“……”

“What a joke that was. I was such a foolish girl. Looking back on it, it’s nothing short of comical.”

Because Senjogahara didn’t want anything like that at all—

So said Kanbaru, with downcast eyes.

“She told me, ‘I don’t think of you as a friend or even as my junior—not now, nor did I ever.’ To my face.”

“Well…”

That did seem like something she would say back then. If there was any weapon she carried deadlier than her stationery, then it was her acid tongue and bitter abuse.

“At first I thought that meant she thought of me as her lover, but it wasn’t the case.”

“That was quite positive of you.”

“Yes. So she was even more blunt the next time. Being friends with a talented junior like me would boost her own reputation, and that was the only reason she was nice to me, the only reason she acted like a caring senior—she said that.”

“…That’s awful.”

Senjogahara’s goal was to hurt her—

Her goal was to make her go away, so—

Yet, only yesterday, Senjogahara had called Kanbaru “that kid” and her junior in middle school, and confirmed that while it was no longer true, they were friends back then. Perhaps I was interpreting her words to hear only what I wanted to hear—but still.

“I was happy that she called me a talented junior, though.”

That was positive of her.

Through and through.

“But—that’s when I learned how powerless I was. I was so conceited to think that I could heal her with my presence. If anything—she didn’t want anyone at all near her.”

There are some people in the world—who aren’t lonely when they’re alone.

It wasn’t hard to pin Senjogahara down as one of them—at the very least, she probably hadn’t ever appreciated herding for its own sake. Even as her middle-school sociable self, she must have thought so quietly—but.

Not being lonely when you’re alone.

That’s different from wanting to be alone.

Just as not liking to deal with people and not liking people aren’t the same.

“That’s why I never accosted Senjogahara after that day. It was the only thing she wanted from me, after all. Of course, I could never forget her—but if stepping away and not doing a thing, if not being by her side could save her—I could agree to that.”

“…Kanbaru.”

I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t simply her gallant attitude that moved me, but her choice of words: the decision wasn’t helpless or

inevitable, but one she could agree to. According to Senjogahara, Kanbaru never came back—but that wasn't it. Kanbaru had stepped away of her own will.

She was so—serious.

About Senjogahara.

From middle school until a year ago, Kanbaru's feelings for her only grew stronger—and.

Even now.

"I was careful not to run into her. I made sure that my field of activity wouldn't overlap with hers, whether that meant meeting her by accident in a hallway, catching a glimpse of her at morning assemblies, or crossing paths with her at the cafeteria. I made arrangements, not just so that I wouldn't have to worry, but so that she wouldn't have to worry about me, either. Of course, I couldn't help people talking about me when I did well in basketball games, so I manipulated the rumors myself to make sure they were a mix of fact and fiction."

"…Which is why the gossip about you is so all over the place, you seem to have a personality disorder."

I got it now.

But to go so far… Might I say, not stalking but…reverse-stalking?

"I managed to do that for one year. It wasn't a gray Sapphic existence, it was a black one. Hard to say whether all of that getting directed into even more enthusiasm for basketball was a good thing or a bad thing… But then, after a year—I learned about you."

"……"

Considering how much she cared about Senjogahara, you'd think

she'd have found out sooner, but maybe it wasn't simply because we were in different years—wasn't it because Kanbaru went out of her way to avoid hearing about Senjogahara?

And yet.

She ended up learning about Koyomi Araragi.

"I couldn't hold back any longer—for the first time in a year, I consciously…visited her. Or tried to. Of course, there'd been a few careless mistakes in the span of a year, but this was my first time intentionally seeing her. And she—was in a classroom that morning, chatting and cooing away with you. There was a happy smile on her face, too, of the kind she never showed me even back in middle school."

"……"

Which particular pile of abuse was Senjogahara heaping on me then? That's about the only time a smile comes across her otherwise expressionless face.

"Do you understand?" Kanbaru looked at me straight. "Something I wanted so very much, that I wanted so very much but had to give up on, you did like it was the most natural thing in the world."

"Kanbaru… No, that—"

"At first, I was jealous," Kanbaru said, punctuating every word. "I tried not to be," she went on, her voice holding back a torrent of emotions. "To the end, I was jealous," she concluded.

"……"

"I wondered why it couldn't have been me. I was jealous of you, and I was disappointed in her. I wondered if she would have accepted me if I were a man. I wondered if the problem was that I was a woman. She didn't need friends or juniors but didn't mind having a lover? In

that case…”

In that case Kanbaru glared at me with an accusatory gaze for the first time.

“In that case, why couldn’t it be me?”

I knew she was my junior, a girl who was younger than me, and that she wasn’t the type to begin putting her hands on me in a frenzy but her eyes were so irate I was scared she might.

“I was jealous of you and disappointed in her. And I was appalled at myself. I was going to heal her heart? I was going to step away? It was a lie, all of it. It was all my ego. It meant I didn’t care as long as I was happy. Was I hoping she’d praise me, or what? Ridiculous. You couldn’t be any more hypocritical. But even then I wanted things to be like before. I wanted her to be kind to me. Even if it was selfish, I wanted to be by her side which is why.”

Then.

With her right hand she touched her left.

Touched the beastly left hand.

“Which is why I wished upon this hand.”

I'm sure there's no need to give a synopsis of "The Monkey's Paw" by William Wymark Jacobs□but not having known about the story before, I thought why, yes, what a well-made ghost or horror story. A textbook tale of dread, tried and true□indeed, once I heard it, I felt as if I'd heard it somewhere before.

It was a classic, in other words.

According to Kanbaru, the monkey's paw was a pretty well-known item, though it didn't compare to vampires, and was reused in lots of different media in lots of different ways. Spun off into a bunch of different patterns, splitting from one new version to the next like an evolutionary tree, but with one shared, underlying factor common to them all, the biggest factor that makes the monkey's paw the Monkey's Paw□

The Monkey's Paw grants its owner's wishes, the story goes.

But not in the way its owner intends, the story goes□

Those two elements.

It was the kind of item you described by appending "the story goes."

Say that you wished for riches. You might wake up the next day to find that your family has died and that you'll be receiving their life insurance. Say that you wished for a promotion at work. You might wake up the next day to find that the company has taken a turn for the worse, that the upper management has been fired, and that you're being promoted at a failing company.

That kind of thing.

It seems the Monkey's Paw was an item created in India by an old mystic to teach people that they should live according to their fate and that terrible disasters await those who defy it. A reputation that it can grant three wishes for three people, for instance, accompanies its entry into the story.

The first thing I think of when I hear about three wishes being granted is the magic lamp in the *Arabian Nights,* but how did that story go and end? Similar tales can be found all over the world. Considering how subject humans are to endless, insatiable desires, narratives where some sort of being capable of granting any wish presents itself to people might be a fundamental form of storytelling. The best known of its kind among ghost stories seems to be "The Monkey's Paw"

"So what's his name again, Mèmè Oshino? Did I hear that right?"

"Yes, but he's not cute like his name makes him out to be. I already told you this, but he's some older dude who likes wearing Hawaiian shirts. I don't want you getting your hopes up or anything. He doesn't *look the part* to say the least, so I want you to be prepared for that."

"No…that's not what I meant. His name is just so striking, or maybe symbolic… It doesn't matter, though. Still, 'Mèmè' would be hard to turn into a nickname…"

"Huh, yeah… I wonder what people called him when he was a kid. I have to admit, I'm curious… Actually, I can't even begin to imagine what he was like as a kid."

Oshino dwelled in an abandoned four-story cram school a little ways away from any residential areas to put it simply, these were ruins. Ones that children wouldn't dare each other to enter, that people living

in the vicinity might not even register as a building—these ruins existed as scenery. They were so aged that a large earthquake would probably raze the whole thing—well, I say aged, but the cram school went out of business only a few years ago when one of the large chains opened up a branch right in front of the station. The site was like a cadaver meant to teach us what a horrible state buildings ended up in after only a few years of disuse. So while I say Oshino dwelled there, it wasn't official in any way, and you could call it a grand case of squatting. He'd been living there for the two months since spring break, surrounded by signs that read "Private Property, No Trespassing." The desks left behind serving as his bed, he roamed around town all day.

Roamed.

Yes, that's right. It wasn't as if he stayed put.

So I could come to see him, as I was doing then—but actually finding him there was a matter of chance. He didn't have a cell phone, or even a PHS, and to be honest, there was a lot of luck involved in meeting him.

It took a little more than an hour to get there on bicycle from Kanbaru's Japanese estate.

It also took a little more than an hour to dash over, if you were Kanbaru, of course.

The two of us looked up at the abandoned cram school.

"By the way," she asked me, "you said you were attacked by a vampire, but—was that your first time with an aberration…or whatever you call them?"

"Yeah, probably."

Maybe I just hadn't noticed earlier instances.

It was the first case that I was aware of.

“Spring break for you, and then her, and now me… It seems suggestive of something, doesn’t it? Nothing before, and now three in quick succession.”

“Yep.” It was actually five if you counted Hanekawa and Hachikuji, but I decided to be somewhat vague and hide that fact out of respect for their personal privacy. “Once you experience it, you’re more likely to experience it again□apparently. So maybe it’s always going to be like this for me now.”

“That sounds tough.”

“Not really… It’s not all tough. Experiencing an aberration means having an experience that’s out of the norm, and you probably come away from it having noticed and gained new things.”

Although I said that, it sounded like I was papering over it or covering my tracks to avoid telling her how I felt. Just thinking back to my spring break experience told me that I was beating around the bush by saying that it wasn’t all tough. Partly because I felt awkward, my eyes wandered over to Kanbaru’s left hand□and the rewound white bandage. I couldn’t see what it concealed, but once you knew, you could tell nonetheless that there was something slightly off about the length and shape. Even if she did her best to make it hard to notice by wrapping some areas multiple times…

“My senior Araragi, she and you have been in the same class for three years in a row even though our school shuffles homerooms every year. I assumed that you two were at least a little close from before□but from what I’ve heard, you only spoke to her for the first time three

weeks ago.”

“I don’t know if I could say it was the absolute first time, but…I wouldn’t have noticed her secret if she hadn’t gone and slipped, and we probably wouldn’t have started dating. And if I hadn’t known Oshino, I doubt I could have helped her out… So in that sense, it was luck. I guess it was convenient…or that I was inconvenienced? You knew about the Monkey’s Paw, Kanbaru, and I knew a vampire. That’s all.”

Upon learning Senjogahara’s secret a year ago Kanbaru was able to believe it so readily, I presumed, thanks to knowing the monkey, just as I’d experienced the demon and the cat by that point. Which meant the only difference between us was that I knew Oshino, a way to fight back.

That’s why I couldn’t help but think.

What if Kanbaru had known Oshino no, not necessarily him, but some sort of spiritual technocrat who could aid Senjogahara and solved her secret a year ago? Wouldn’t Kanbaru be in my position then rather than me? Putting aside differences in age and gender for the time being

Sheer luck.

You could call it a fated meeting but it was chance.

“I appreciate how considerate you’re being,” Kanbaru thanked me, “but I wish you wouldn’t say that. She isn’t that kind of person. She wouldn’t confuse gratitude for love. That was just what got the ball rolling.” Kanbaru’s words were tinted with a pale desolation. “And that’s exactly why it’s so frustrating. When she rebuffed me, I stepped away. Meanwhile, you chased after her. If anything made a difference, it wasn’t vampires versus monkeys, nor knowing this Oshino, it was that.”

“……”

I'm sure of it, she muttered.

Talking to her like this made me realize how surprisingly introspective she was…the complete opposite of what you'd expect from her image of an athletic girl full of vim and vigor. But if she was remorseful, I felt like I was, too.

What was it?

This emotion akin to remorse as I chatted with Kanbaru, as if there were pins being pricked into my heart—I knew there was no need but found myself constantly trying to paper over things.

And that made me feel even more remorseful.

"Yes…but," Kanbaru said, "I am honestly glad that her problem was already gone. It might be strange for me to be thanking you, but that's what I'd like to do, from the bottom of my heart."

"Well, like I told you, it wasn't me, the credit should go to Oshino—actually, no, it wasn't him either. Senjoghara got saved thanks to Senjogahara. She simply went and saved herself all on our own."

That's how it was.

Oshino and I had barely done a thing.

There were no two ways about it, that was it—

"Ah…maybe you're right. But can I ask you one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"I get why she fell for you. It puts my jealousy and disappointment to shame… Yes, I think I get it. But what is it about her that made you fall for her? You said she was just another classmate for over two years, a classmate you'd never even spoken to."

"Well…"

It was hard to answer when she put it so bluntly. Part of me was embarrassed, but the bigger issue was being asked for a specific reason… It was just that in that park on that day, on Mother's Day□

Oh, of course.

It made sense.

That was the source of my remorse.

"…Why do you ask, Kanbaru?"

"Well. What I'm trying to say is that if it's just her body you're after, I think I could take her place."

"……"

An incredible proposal.

With her right hand and her bandaged left, Kanbaru grabbed her own breasts and squished them together and up. She was still wearing her school uniform, and enhanced by the immodest mismatch, her enticing pose exuded an almost unnatural allure.

"I think I'm pretty cute."

If she did say so herself.

"I think I'd look a little more feminine if I grew my hair out, and I'm not indifferent to skin care. Plus, thanks to having always played sports, my body is nice and toned, with just the right kind of waistline. I've been told I have the kind of figure that men savor."

"Bring over whoever told you that, so I can kill him."

"It was the basketball team advisor."

"This world is done for!"

"You can't kill him. We'd get suspended from matches."

So what do you think, Kanbaru asked for a second time.

She didn't seem to be joking or half-joking or jocular, but absolutely serious, and she bore down on me to give her one of two answers: yes or no.

"I'm ready to do this, you know. All you have to do is ask, any time and any place, and I'll be the bottom for your top."

"Bottom?! Top?! Why would I ask for that?!"

"Hm? Oh, I see. You don't have any grounding in BL. That's surprising."

"I don't want to talk about BL with a younger girl!"

"Hm? BL just stands for 'Boys' Love.'"

"I know that! It's not like I got that wrong!"

Yes, I'd noticed.

When I cleaned her room, there'd been so many books scattered around with those kinds of covers!

I'd gone out of my way to avoid the subject!

I'd pretended I hadn't seen anything!

"Oh, so you weren't confused. I was sure you were, judging by your reaction. Then what exactly are you so mad about? I didn't mean to offend you with anything I said. Could it mean you're a bottom?"

"Not another word about this!"

"I'm more of a sub, so I don't think I can top."

"Wha… Um, you lost me."

A sub-what?

Were we entering forbidden territory here?

I felt like our conversation was treading on thin ice.

"And anyway, Kanbaru, why would a boy and a girl have to do BL anything? There's zero need for that."

“But you see, I want to preserve my maidenhood for her□”

“I don’t need to hear it!”

The thin ice had cracked. This conversation was underwater!

Hitagi Senjogahara and Suruga Kanbaru, are the two of you conspiring to smash into dust every illusion I have about women?! I’m sure of it now, the crisis management part of my brain is telling me outright, it’s unmistakable, you’re old acquaintances, the Valhalla Duo!

Tiptoeing and sneaking off, or running away on fleet feet, my chances at happiness were abandoning me in droves. I could feel it with my whole body and heaved a sigh.

Ahh… They were grinding away at my sanity with all this risqué talk about “going after her body” and “supple, carefree limbs, the kind of figure that men savor”… Though precocious in her own way, talking with Hachikuji the day before was fun because she never sounded weirdly jaded□or so I thought back fondly to my conversation with a grade school kid.

I was a terminal case.

“I’m sorry, but if you’ll allow me to be intrusive,” warned Kanbaru, “I don’t think you’ll be able to make it very far in the adult world if you can’t talk smut with girls younger than you. Be smart and jettison your precious notions about femininity as soon as you can.”

“If there’s anything I don’t want to be scolded about by a girl younger than me, that would be it.”

And her choice of words, “talk smut”…

Not that putting it another way would have made it fine.

“Still,” she insisted, “I don’t want to belabor the point, but expecting me to be chaste thanks to these flimsy illusions of yours

presents actual problems that start with saying hello. Don't blame me, girls are interested in dirty talk, too."

"Uh huh…"

This whole episode was liable to foment its own set of illusions about women, though… Was I wrong to think that with Senjogahara or her, the context was different?

"All right," Kanbaru said, "then let's get back to if you're a briefs guy or a boxers guy."

"I don't think that's what we were talking about?!"

"Huh? Was it whether or not I wear panties under my bike shorts?"

"Excuse me, but you don't, Miss Kanbaru?!" I was so shaken I found myself speaking politely. "Th-Then those bike shorts peeking out under your skirt are…!"

"Even if that's the case, why be shocked? Bike shorts were originally designed as a form of underwear."

"All the more so then! You mean you're walking around with your underwear out for the world to see!"

Moreover…that skirt of hers got blown in every direction but down when she ran and jumped!

"Hmph. Yes, I suppose you could say that, but just think of it as the chic dispensation of a sporty girl."

"No! It's the perverted behavior of an exhibitionist!"

"Oh, now I remember, that's not what we were talking about, either. It was whether I could serve as a replacement for□"

"Hold on, don't rewind the conversation and leave such a question hanging! Tell me right now if you're wearing anything underneath!"

"Can we gloss over such vulgar matters, please? It's a triviality."

“It isn’t a triviality, it’s a watershed moment□is my junior a sporty girl or an exhibitionist?!”

Smuttiness aside, we were going on and on about nothing in particular.

“Okay, then,” conceded Kanbaru, “why don’t you look at it this way. I’m both a sporty girl and an exhibitionist. For those who see me as a sporty girl, I am that; for those who see me as an exhibitionist, I am that too.”

“Stop with these word games! That kind of line stops being cool once you get out of middle school! What are you, my little sister?!”

Our conversation about nothing in particular reached a peak.

It could only be about something now.

“…But listen, Kanbaru. Seriously, no matter how hard you try, you’re not going to take Senjogahara’s place.”

“……”

She wasn’t going to take her place.

I was talking about more than what she’d said.

“You’re not Senjogahara, after all. No one can take someone else’s place, and no one can become someone else, either. Senjogahara is Hitagi Senjogahara, and you are Suruga Kanbaru. No matter how much you love her, no matter how much you idolize her, no matter how much more you do.”

“…You’re right.” Kanbaru nodded after a brief pause. “You’re exactly right.”

“Yeah. So let’s stop wasting time chatting, and get going. And also, can you knock it off with that pose already? You’ve turned me into someone who has an extended conversation with a high school girl

who's groping her own breasts. That's too surreal a picture for me."

"Guh. I didn't notice."

"Notice." It went for other stuff, too. "The sun will go down if we don't hurry—it's bad news if it gets dark, right? For your left hand."

"Yes. It also means everything's fine as long as it's bright out. I'm completely okay for another few hours at least."

"Oh… Being active only at night somehow can't help but remind me of vampires…"

Kanbaru and I walked alongside the chain-link fence that surrounded the building until we found a large hole. Three weeks earlier, Senjogahara had gone through it with me—this time I was with her junior, Kanbaru.

I'd never thought I'd have anything to do with her.

The webs we weave.

Ties that bind.

"Watch your feet."

"Yes. Thank you kindly."

I pushed forward through the wall of unkempt grass, trying to make a path for Kanbaru as she followed behind me. Wondering how it was going to be in summertime if it was this way now, I entered the crumbling, or you might say already-crumbled, cram school.

It was still a mess.

The concrete fragments, empty cans, signs, shards of glass, and who knew what else were still a mess, a royal mess. The building was already dim in the late afternoon as it had no power, making it seem even more decayed than otherwise. I thought Oshino could at least tidy up the building if he had so much free time on his hands. Didn't living in such

a place depress him?

I guess it was a little better than Kanbaru's room…

Senjogahara had scowled at the building's wretched state and Oshino's insouciance, but I wouldn't have to worry with Kanbaru…

"It's filthy," she said. "I can't believe it. If this Oshino person lives here, he ought to clean up."

"……"

I guess she was tough on others about certain things?

Or maybe it was that she wasn't self-conscious… I thought her brazen attitude came from her confidence, but perhaps there was another side to it.

That was one way she and Senjogahara were different.

Senjogahara was abnormally self-conscious.

Oshino primarily roosted on the fourth floor.

I walked□in the dim light.

The farther we got from the entrance, the deeper the darkness grew□what an oversight on my part. I'd been to the building so many times, I could have at least brought a flashlight. I'd brought the envelope containing a hundred thousand yen that Senjogahara had entrusted to me□in other words, I'd planned on coming here regardless of how my conversation with Kanbaru panned out. I could have spared the idea some thought.

But, well.

It depended on the time and the place, but for the most part, I was fine with darkness…which is why I found myself forgetting such obvious things.

Mementos from my time as a vampire.

“……”

I turned around when we reached the stairs to notice that Kanbaru’s steps were incredibly timid and wobbly. She must not like the dark, I thought. When you considered that she was normally a fearless sportswoman, her gait appeared all the more precarious and uncertain. In her state, walking up stairs would be an ordeal. Whatever was up with her left arm, it’d be a big problem if she hurt her legs, too… I remembered how I’d led Senjogahara by the hand when we came here together…

That was the first time I had held her hand.

Hmm…what to do? Kanbaru must have declined to ride behind me out of such considerations, and come to think of it, I’d learned only yesterday just how strict Senjogahara could be about cheating…

“Hey, my junior Kanbaru.”

“What is it, my senior Araragi?”

“Hold out your right hand.”

“Like this?”

“All right. It’s docking time.”

I pulled her hand toward me by the tip and had her grip the belt that I wore on my school-issued slacks.

“We’re about to climb up some stairs, so don’t trip. I’ll be sure to walk up slowly, so be careful.”

“……”

No matter how strict Senjogahara’s guidelines were, this degree of physical contact couldn’t possibly count as cheating. It was a brilliant idea. It seemed like sophistry, I admit, but I would at least have a proper excuse prepared for Senjogahara.

“Aren’t you kind,” Kanbaru said, tugging on my belt as though she were testing its strength. “You must get told that often. That you’re a good, kind person.”

“Who wants to get told, and often, the kind of thing you tell someone who doesn’t have a personality?”

“Even when it comes to guiding me through the dark, you’re minding both her and me, and I’m grateful from the bottom of my heart. I’m pained by your consideration. I’m envious of your discretion.”

“…Was my thinking that transparent?”

She was a sharp one.

You usually wouldn’t catch on to that.

But since she did, why go and spell it out? I felt so awkward. The jokey way I’d gone about it made it so much worse.

“My senior, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it? Ask whatever you want, as long as it’s not about tops and bottoms.”

“Oh, then I’ll put that bit off until later.”

“It’s on your list of questions?!”

“As are panties and exhibitionism.”

“We already played it out!”

“To be frank, only dirty talk interests me.”

“I won’t have such a character! Just hurry up with your question!”

“Judging by everything you’ve said…it seems like you haven’t talked to her about me at all.”

“Hunh? No, I have. That’s how I learned you two were the Valhalla Duo.”

To be exact, I’d heard that from Hanekawa, but I hadn’t understood

their relationship until I checked with Senjogahara. I might have guessed, but guesses were all they were going to be. I wouldn't have thought to ask Hanekawa.

"That's not what I meant," Kanbaru said. "About my left hand. About my left hand attacking you…"

"Oh, that. Yeah, I haven't had the opportunity… I was in no state to last night, and I didn't know the truth of the matter anyway, or that your left hand was like that. I wasn't even close to sure you were behind the attack in the first place. It was just speculation. As far as she knows, I ran into a telephone pole on my bicycle."

"Will that do, with all the collateral damage?"

"Well, I can't get the police or a hospital involved thanks to my formerly vampiric body. If things go public, it'll be just as annoying for me. I don't plan on keeping what happened with you a secret from Senjogahara forever, of course, but…I just thought it was something you should tell her, not me."

"I should?"

"See, I'm not a kind person or a good person. It's just that I have my motives□"

My underhanded calculations.

My scheming persistence.

Something I, myself, could never do□

"…Hm? Whoa there."

Shinobu was there on the landing between the third and fourth floors.

Shinobu Oshino.

A blond girl who looked to be about eight years old, her skin so white it seemed translucent, wearing a helmet and a pair of goggles—she was there on the landing sitting directly on the floor, legs folded, arms around her knees. You might have mistaken her for the spirit of a dead child from Japanese folklore if not for her golden hair.

I yelled in surprise despite myself.

Shinobu glared intensely at me and Kanbaru as we came climbing up the stairs. It was a loaded gaze full of hate and gravity, of unspoken words and unfulfilled desires.

"……"

I ignored her.

I ignored her, averting my eyes, and walked around her, refusing to pay her notice, to proceed to the fourth floor… But why was she sitting on the landing, of all places? Could she have gotten in a fight with Oshino?

"H-Hey, what was with that girl?" asked Kanbaru in a mildly agitated, flighty voice once we were on the fourth floor. Then again, it would have been weirder for her to pay no mind to a girl like Shinobu mysteriously sitting on the floor of some ruins… Well, part of Kanbaru's body had turned into an aberration. Could she have sensed something from Shinobu?

"She was super freaking cute!"

"You said that with the biggest smile you've shown all day!"

"I want to hold her in my arms… No, I want her to hold me in her arms!"

“You fall for anyone, don’t you?!” I’d thought there was only one girl for her. Plus, this was a child she was talking about. “Just keep that stuff to yourself…”

“I don’t want to keep any secrets from you, though.”

“You still don’t need to put out the naked truth.”

“Naked?”

“Don’t react to just that word! Do I have to watch every single phrase I use now? I’ve never met someone who’s harder to talk to!”

She was a real horn dog, or rather, she wasn’t Sapphic only for Senjogahara… Every one of my illusions, and not just ones about women, was being blown to pieces like it was a carpet bombing. Swearing to myself that I’d never allow her to meet Hachikuji, I gloomily conveyed a warning.

“…Well, you should stay away from□that.”

A vampire.

□husk of.

A vampire.

□dregs of.

That was what Shinobu Oshino, the blond girl, was.

When the devil is away□the mice.

“Hm. I see… Too bad,” Kanbaru lamented.

“And now that you’ve said so with the saddest face you’ve shown all day, here we are. Time to find out whether Oshino’s in or not… We can’t just put this off until tomorrow if he isn’t, though. My life’s in real danger.”

“…Sorry.”

“I’m not trying to be mean or anything. Don’t feel bad about it.”

“Well, I don’t feel good about it, either. I think I need to make it up to you somehow. Ah, right, what’s your favorite color?”

“Huh? My favorite color? Are you giving me a present? I don’t know if I have one, but if I had to say, I guess aqua blue?”

“Okay, got it.” Kanbaru nodded. “Then I promise from now on, whenever I meet you, I’ll do my best to be wearing aqua blue underwear.”

“Don’t drag me in to your dirty talk or make it seem like I’m the reason! It’s all on you and your sexual frustration!”

There were three classrooms on the fourth floor. The doors to all of them were broken. If Oshino was in the building, he would be in one of the three, but□

The first room was a miss.

We checked in the second room□and there he was.

“You’re late, Araragi. I’ve been waiting so long that I nearly fell asleep.”

Mèmè Oshino□lay there on a linoleum floor so cracked and ripped you wouldn’t just trip but get deep cuts if you walked across it with bare feet, a piece of cardboard box so discolored it must have been rotting as his only bedding. And without getting up, he greeted us off the bat with those words in his usual all-knowing tone, despite not knowing the first detail about our situation.

His crumpled, psychedelic Hawaiian shirt, his shaggy hair, and his generally filthy appearance. Words like “clean” or “refreshing” existed on a separate plane from the man. You could say it was an appropriate look for the ruins he lived in, but what he could have ever looked like before coming to them was by now beyond my imagination.

Oshino scratched his head like even that was a bother.

Then, and only then did he notice Kanbaru, who, out of anxiety or alarmed by the very questionable Oshino, was trying to hide behind me and holding tight to my belt with her right hand though we were already here.

“Oh. So you’re brought yet another girl with you today, Araragi. You’re with a new one every time we meet why, I’m quite glad for you.”

“Shut up. Don’t keep spouting the same lines.”

“You say that, but what am I supposed to do when it’s the same situation? My repertoire is limited. Hm? And another girl with straight bangs, at that. Judging by her uniform, are you two classmates? Does your high school regulate hairstyles? Interesting, that’s a very antiquated system they’ve kept around.”

“No, we don’t have such rules.”

It was just coincidence.

Or rather, though Kanbaru wore hers short, it was probably because she was imitating Senjogahara that they had similar hairstyles. I wasn’t aware of any reason behind Senjogahara’s, but as for Hanekawa, well, as a symbol of seriousness? That had to be it more or less.

“So it’s what you’re into, after all,” asserted Oshino. “Hmph. In that case, I’ll cut little Shinobu’s hair, too, for your next visit. She just lets it grow out, and it’s about time she had a haircut. In exchange, do you think you could bring a girl with a one-length haircut next time? I might be wasting my breath, but I’m putting the request out there.”

“…I saw Shinobu on our way up. What’s she doing there?”

“Oh, she’s sulking because I ate one more than I should of her

snack-time Mister Donuts. She's been like that since yesterday."

"……"

What kind of a vampire was she?

And what kind of a dude was he?

"I tearfully handed over the Pon de Ring, so she's one narrow-minded little girl. I think I need to teach her the phrase, 'quality over quantity.'"

"I don't care… I couldn't care any less. Also, Oshino, one correction. She's not my classmate. Take a close look, her scarf isn't the same color as Senjogahara's or Hanekawa's, right? She's a year younger than me, and her name is Suruga Kanbaru. Kanbaru as in 'god' and 'plains.' And Suruga as in…umm."

Oops.

I knew how to write it, but it was hard to explain…

The barely literate Koyomi Araragi was showing his colors.

"Suruga as in 'Suruga-toi,'" Kanbaru chimed in helpfully.

Thank goodness…but wait, what exactly was that?

I'd never heard the term before. Was it *toi* in the sense of "question"? Like some famous quiz? A riddle like with the Sphinx?

"Ah, 'Suruga-toi.' Of course, of course." Oshino nodded in clear comprehension.

Ugh, if he hadn't known, I would've gotten an explanation without having to speak up… I clicked my tongue, but I hated having to wonder, so I asked Kanbaru, "What's 'Suruga-toi'?"

"It's a famous method of torture from the Edo period. They'd hogtie your hands and legs behind you, hang you from the ceiling, put a heavy rock on your back, and spin you around."

“Don’t use a torture method to explain your name!”

“It’s something that I’d love to undergo sometime in my life.”

“……!”

So she was a sapphist, a BL fan, a sub, a bottom, a pedo, and a masochist?!

How could all of that apply to any one person…

The star of our school didn’t need to spread conflicting rumors about herself. She already had a personality disorder.

I was at a loss for words.

“Anyway, I’m Suruga Kanbaru.”

The exchange seemed to have relaxed her, and finally letting go of my belt, Suruga came out of half-hiding and in her usual proud, confident, and unhesitating way, stated her name, her right hand in front of her chest.

“I’m Araragi’s junior. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, missy. I’m Mèmè Oshino.”

While Suruga was smiling

Oshino was smirking.

Written out, “smile” and “smirk” look similar, a difference of only two letters, but seeing their expressions up close, I received very dissimilar impressions that were pretty much diametrically opposed. It proved to a painful degree that looking happy wasn’t enough. Yes, Oshino’s was lighthearted too, but so much so that it felt unpleasant. The man was just sculpted to seem fake.

“…Hmph. If you’re his junior, that makes you missy tsundere’s junior as well.”

As he said this, Oshino’s eyes were unfocused and distant as if he

were looking at Kanbaru's back—and me and Senjogahara both being third-years and Kanbaru therefore being Senjogahara's junior as well didn't seem to be his entire point.

But maybe I was reading too much into it.

"Oshino—anyway, I should start by giving this to you. It's from the very same missy tsundere, Senjogahara."

"Hm? An envelope? Oh, money. Money, money. Perfect, I was just starting to feel squeezed. This should last me until the rainy season. Once it starts, I won't die of thirst, but I thought I'd be keeping a stiff upper lip in the meantime."

"What a thing to say to sensitive adolescents."

It was amid such dire straits that they'd fought over their Mister Donuts… No wonder Shinobu was sulking. Vampire or not, she did come from a noble bloodline. Cohabitating in these ruins with a filthy older guy was like plunging to the lowest depths… Since I was partly to blame, I didn't know what to think…

Oshino checked the contents of the envelope.

"Yep, exactly a hundred thousand yen. This clears out any balance between me and missy tsundere. You know, she's made a good impression on me, giving this to you instead of coming to hand it to me herself. She seems versed in the way of the world."

"Huh? Shouldn't it be the other way around? It feels like giving it to you in person would be a show of good faith, or good grace—"

"It's all the same whether you make gestures like that or not. But I don't intend on having that argument with you, Araragi, it'd be a pointless one at best. So—what's up with this missy?" Oshino asked

casually, jabbing his chin in Kanbaru's direction as he crammed the envelope (those fresh bills, all for naught) into the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt. "I'm sure you didn't bring her here just so you could introduce a cute junior to me. Or did you actually do it just to show her off? If that's the case, I underestimated the kind of man you are, Araragi… Ha hah, but that couldn't possibly be it. Which means□hm, could it be that bandage? Ah…"

"Mister Oshino. I'm□" Kanbaru began to say something.

He slowly waved his hand as if to cut her off. "Let's start from the beginning. It doesn't seem like a very happy story. Stories about arms never are, in my experience. Especially if it's your left hand."

Mixed among the crushed soda cans, candy wrappers, and empty instant noodle cups I found while cleaning up Suruga Kanbaru's room was a single item that gave me pause, a long and thin paulownia box. I could feel its age from the color of the thing, and though it was covered in scratches, probably due to how carelessly Kanbaru treated it, the box seemed thick and sturdy. I assumed that it held some sort of curio□maybe a vase. Its presence, or that it might contain some such object, didn't seem odd given how impressive the Japanese home I stood in was.

But.

The box was empty.

That of course wasn't enough for me to classify it as trash, so I placed it on top of some cardboard boxes for the time being, but around when we got down to business, Kanbaru made a show of reaching out, grabbing the box, and placing it between the two of us. Then she asked me what I thought had been inside the box. A vase or something, I replied candidly.

"So even you can be wrong sometimes… This might be rude of me, but I'm relieved. Saved. I feel like you've given me a glimpse of your humanity."

"…And what was inside it?"

"A mummy," she replied straightaway. "*A mummified left hand*□was in it."

"……"

A mummified left hand, inside a paulownia box.

According to Kanbaru, she used it for the first time in elementary school. Her mother had given it to her eight years ago when Kanbaru was still in third grade.

It was apparently the last time she ever saw her mother.

A few days after Kanbaru was given the box, both of her parents died in a traffic accident the timing was so perfect it was as if her mother had known what was going to happen. Kanbaru said it happened while she was in math class at her elementary school. They'd died instantly in a multiple car pile-up on some far-off highway. Their car caught fire, and the remains were left in an awful state.

Kanbaru was taken in by her grandparents on her father's side.

Taken in to the Japanese home where we sat.

She said she'd lived with her parents in an apartment until then, just the three of them because her mother and father had eloped. Their wedding had brought them no blessings or congratulations. Her father came from a traditional and storied family, while her mother's world was far removed from any of that…or so Kanbaru told me. I had to wonder if those kinds of things still happened in this day and age, but she said they do all the time.

"My mom suffered because of that. My dad rebelled against such customs, but it was no use. His family pretty much cut ties with him. In fact, I hadn't met my grandparents until the day of my parents' funeral. I didn't even know their names and they didn't know mine, either. That was the first thing they asked me, what my name was."

"Huh…"

Flooded on top and in blazes on the bottom.

You don't need to worry about them, at all.

Those kinds of things□happened.

But despite whatever strife had intervened with her mother, Kanbaru was their son's only daughter□their grandchild. Taking her in was the natural thing to do, and so Kanbaru left the town where she'd lived her entire life, of course transferring schools in the process.

She wasn't able to fit in.

"The way I spoke was different. I might talk like this now, but when I was still with my parents, we were all the way out on the tip of Kyushu, probably to get as far away as possible from this home. They talk in a thick accent there, and well…I wouldn't call it bullying, but I was made fun of, and I didn't have any friends."

"Um…so it wasn't the same elementary school as Senjogahara's?"

"Right. I met her in middle school."

"Okay."

It made sense, address-wise.

She probably wasn't with Hanekawa back then, either.

"When I think back to it, I was throwing everything off balance in my new environment, and I wasn't completely blameless. It's obvious to me now, but my parents' death had hit me hard, and I'd closed off my heart. You can't expect people to treat you kindly when you've closed off your heart. But, and I can only say this because so much time has passed□back then, I was still deeply mired in my parents' death. Not that I was able to sit back and reminisce about them. I couldn't even drown myself in my memories of them. That was because my grandfather and grandmother threw away every last one of my father and mother's possessions. It was like they wanted to raise me as

someone who had nothing to do with my parents."

But just so you know, Kanbaru said.

"My grandmother and grandfather are both people of character—I do respect them, and I'm truly grateful that they've looked after me all this time. It's just that their relationship with my parents is beyond me."

It made sense.

Too much time had elapsed for it to be mere past strife.

And that was why the only mementos she had left of her parents were whatever memories she retained, along with, yes, that paulownia box her mother had given her.

It may have been sealed tight.

But she hadn't been told not to open it.

So she did.

The mummified left hand.

But back in those days—the mummified hand *only went down to its wrist.* There was also a letter from her mother inside the box. Well, it wasn't so much a letter, given what was written on it—but a simple user's manual for the left hand.

It stated that it was a tool for making wishes come true.

It would make any wish come true.

It would make three and only three wishes come true.

It was such an item.

She'd gone up a school year to become a fourth grader and was either nine or ten years old—whichever she was, whether you believed that kind of fantastic story was a tossup at that age. Just barely yes, or just barely no, one or the other. It's probably an age group where the split between kids who believe in Santa Claus or not is about fifty-fifty.

Or maybe that's just an illusion that people of my generation and above hold… At least, I don't think I believed in Santa Claus when I was in fourth grade, but maybe some of the special gadgets in cartoons were credible to me.

Kanbaru was straddling that line.

In other words, she half-believed and half-doubted it would work, and just as she might try a charm printed in a girls' magazine, with a casual attitude really, she made a wish upon the mummified hand.

It didn't matter what the first one was.

It was like one of those charms.

She was just trying it out.

"Though I did know what my second wish would be if the first one worked," Kanbaru said.

Of course she did.

I knew already it had to be a wish about her parents, right?

Something about their being alive.

I want to be able to run faster.

Such was the wish the fourth grader Suruga Kanbaru made to the mummified thing. She was apparently a notoriously slow runner back then…and that, just as much as her accent, contributed to her being teased. From a high schooler's perspective, it seemed as ridiculous of a reason to make fun of someone as an accent, but being a slow runner is, in any case, a serious cause of distress for a grade school kid. It just so happened that field day was coming up soon at her school and she'd made the wish thinking that everyone would look at her in a new way if she could just win the foot race.

"I was fatally unathletic at the time. I'm not talking about having

slow reflexes or slow anything, but actually tripping over myself just walking around."

"Huh… But now."

Our basketball ace.

A star.

"…Wait, so does that mean□"

"If only it did," Kanbaru said. But instead. "I had a dream that night. A dream of children being attacked□by a *monster wearing a raincoat.* A nightmare□where they were tucked into bed and the monster's *left hand* attacked them mercilessly."

"……"

"I'm sure someone with your intuition has already figured out how this story ends. When I woke up the next day and went to school□four students were absent. And all four of them were supposed to run in the same race as me at field day."

The Monkey's Paw.

The Monkey's Paw grants its owner's wishes, the story goes.

But not in the way its owner intends, the story goes□

"I was terrified. I went to the library in a panic to find out what the mummified thing really was□and I came across Jacobs' 'The Monkey's Paw' in no time. My shoulders trembled with fear… If I'd made my second wish first, what would have happened, I wondered. As it was, those classmates of mine could easily have died… Fortunately, it wasn't that serious, but it could have turned out that way."

Kanbaru returned the thing to its box, sealed it even tighter than before, and stuffed it in the depths of her closet. There would be no second or third wish, of course not□she wanted to pretend none of it

ever happened. She wanted to forget it all.

But.

She couldn't.

No matter how much she tried to forget about it, she found that she couldn't. Because there was still time until field day and during practice the next day, they decided to place Kanbaru in another group.

There were five others this time.

She would be racing against five other people.

"What do you think I did?"

"……"

"What do you think I should have done?"

Whatever I thought, if she sat and did nothing well, the consequences were as clear as day. The same thing would happen…and repeat itself over and over again. Normally, the only way out of the situation would be to make another wish upon the paw to ask it to cancel the first wish. But Kanbaru was afraid to. Now that she'd learned about the paw, she was afraid. It granted wishes, but not in the way its owner intended and she had no idea how the revocation might come true.

Which is why Kanbaru ran.

She ran, and ran, and ran.

She was slow

So she worked to become fast.

"My only option was to fulfill my wish on my own. Because if I did, there'd be no reason for the paw to attack my classmates. And fortunately, I started getting the hang of it as soon as I started there wasn't any physical issue that made me slow, like being heavy or having

a bad leg, so while I didn't become athletic overnight, I improved when it came to running. I managed to come in first at field day… Thanks to that, I started to make friends with my classmates. It of course took a good bit of time, though."

Having made her own wish come true—she never stopped working, even after field day. To say that she must have been talented to begin with would perhaps be unkind. Her continued efforts only continued to flower, to the point that she began hearing from middle school track teams not long after entering sixth grade.

Tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup.

But Kanbaru couldn't join a track team. She couldn't put herself in *a place where people might be faster than her*—because she didn't know the reach of her first wish. Maybe it expired the moment she took first place at field day—maybe it would last forever. There was no way to find out. Since there wasn't, the latter possibility was a source of fear.

For Kanbaru.

She already knew she wasn't made to be a distance runner—mini-marathons in grade school were one thing, but she couldn't keep going in middle school and high school. If anyone were even a little bit faster than her, all her efforts would be for naught, end of story.

That was probably why she decided to join the basketball team in middle school—if her field only extended as far as those courts did, no one could catch up to her.

"Forgoing clubs and sports might have been an option, but not only did I need to stay in good shape, just in case, but also athletics were a more or less compulsive refuge for me by then. If I didn't do

something—I felt like I'd be crushed. People call me sporty, but I'm not sure if I'm the real deal. I was just motivated by fear."

But.

Playing basketball ended up being fun.

She ended up liking it.

Her speed, which had been a compulsive refuge—she could now put to positive use. She'd thought of her legs merely as a means to run away from the paw, but she could apply them constructively—towards an actual goal.

Plus.

Becoming the star of the team—

She ended up getting to know Hitagi Senjogahara.

"She was the star of the track team…and she came to watch me since I had a reputation for being fast. She might have forgotten by now…and even if she does remember, she might not think anything of it, but she was the one who came to me first."

"Huh…"

That was a bit of a surprise.

Even if it was the middle-school and not the current-day Senjogahara, it was still a surprise.

"She asked me to run a hundred-meter race with her, saying that it didn't have to be official or anything. It killed me to have to turn her down. This was a charming person who was a year above me. It might not have been love at first sight, but I'd fallen for her by the third day of talking to her. I started wanting to be near her. Being with her was therapeutic."

Therapeutic.

The word was as far removed from Senjogahara today as Pluto is from the Sun—but it really seemed that meeting her allowed Kanbaru to put out of her mind the mummy she'd received from her mother, the paulownia box stuffed in the closet.

It let her forget.

It let her forget—what she wanted to forget.

But.

"It was still there in the back of my mind, sitting in my subconscious, and more than once after that day, I was seized by a sudden impulse to use the paw. I'd be seized by an urge to rely on it. Like when we faced a really strong team in basketball. Like when I got in an awful fight with a friend. Like when I wanted to get into Naoetsu High where my senior Senjogahara was… Like when she rejected me."

Each time—she held out.

Each time, she managed to make it happen on her own.

Or, each time, she gave up on it.

By then, she understood why her mother had given her the box—it was as a sort of wish that Kanbaru would become someone who handled any problem she came across by herself. Unlike the one in "The Monkey's Paw," which taught you to accept fate, her mother's lesson must have been to alter your destiny with your own hands. It had been passed down again and again—her mother had gotten it from her mother, and her mother's mother had gotten it from her mother, and her mother's mother's mother, and so on. The lesson passed down for generations had to be that you fulfilled your own wishes. So it was all thanks to herself that Kanbaru was fast and also smart.

She hadn't been born with it.

It was the result of work, of blood, sweat, and tears.

She always remained aware of that.

Hence.

She might have been able to solve Senjogahara's secret, her problem, by wishing upon the paw, but didn't even then.

Quietly.

She stepped away.

She gave up on being by Senjogahara's side.

She gave up balling her fists, biting her lip.

She didn't mind dying for Senjogahara's sake.

Suruga Kanbaru had told me that in no uncertain terms.

Kanbaru smothered her own feelings for Senjogahara's sake.

Stood by and watched her own heart die.

What she didn't want to forget.

What she couldn't forget she did forget.

"But a year later…I found out about you. I ended up finding out about you and her. I ended up seeing her by your side."

She couldn't hold out anymore.

She couldn't do it.

She couldn't give up.

She had no recollection of when she'd opened the closet, when she'd taken the paulownia box out of it, when she'd undone the seal, or when she'd wished upon the paw she hadn't paused *even when the paw that had only gone down to its wrist was extended to the elbow* and when

she noticed.

Her left hand had turned into an aberration.

Her arm had turned into a beast's paw.

Kanbaru

Felt truly terrified for the first time in seven years.

"…And so you started stalking me after that. Come to think of it, every time we met, you asked me if anything odd had happened to me."

So that's what she meant.

She wasn't making small talk.

She wasn't trying to spy on Senjogahara, either… Unable to play the sport she loved with her arm in that state, Kanbaru must not have wanted to go out in public at all, but she went as far as to bandage it up and hide it because she was concerned about my safety?

But then, four days after she started stalking me.

The night of the fourth day.

That's when it happened.

Kanbaru said she had a dream

A dream where a monster in a raincoat attacked me.

And that was why she seemed so calm from the moment I stepped into Class 2-2.

She already realized everything

Knew what had happened.

This backstory was quite different from my analysis.

I'd surmised that an aberration was involved, but Kanbaru actually didn't intend the phenomenon… It was all the paw's doing.

The Monkey's Paw grants its owner's wishes, the story goes.

But not in the way its owner intends, the story goes

The simplest way to be by Senjogahara's side was to eliminate her current boyfriend, Koyomi Araragi—thought the paw.

Probably.

And afraid of that, Kanbaru was stalking me—

But her premonition was on the mark.

In truth, if I wasn't who I was…if Koyomi Araragi wasn't Koyomi Araragi, the formerly immortal human with an experience of being a vampire, I would have certainly died at that point. I wouldn't have been able to dodge the first two strikes, and even if I had, the third blow would have been lethal. That was its absurd potential and capacity for destruction. My guess was that those four elementary school kids had been spared thanks to Kanbaru's body still being a fourth grader's and also still being unathletic—but now she was on another level. Ironically, the body she'd forged to escape her first wish was making her second wish inflict that much more damage. Only her left arm had attacked me, but the incredible speed that my eyes couldn't even track—that physical capacity belonged to Suruga Kanbaru. It was an upgraded version of the same.

Capacity—destructive capacity.

A capacity for violence.

And.

It was far from over—nowhere near over, since I had survived. Once the sun set and night came, the monster in the raincoat would attack me, again and again—Kanbaru would keep on having dreams about that fiend assaulting me.

Over and over, until I died.

Until her dream came true.

Until her wish was granted.

Until Kanbaru's second wish was granted.

She wanted to be by Hitagi Senjogahara's side.

That was all she had wished for□

"'Annoyances come / In forms none greater than that / Of the visitor / But then of course I speak not / Of yourself, my esteem'd friend'□"

"Huh?" Kanbaru opened her eyes dubiously when I recited the poem. "What was that?"

"Nothing… I was just wondering if the person we're visiting will welcome us□"

And then.

Without changing our clothes or eating lunch, we went straight to the remote, abandoned cram school where Mèmè Oshino and Shinobu Oshino lived, me riding my bike and Kanbaru dashing on her own two legs.

And that□finally brings us to now.

The present moment.

Kanbaru and I were facing Oshino on the fourth floor. Despite giving him the rundown, he showed nothing resembling a reaction, simply looking up at the fluorescent lights hanging (just hanging, of course, since there was no power) from the not-so-high ceiling. He wiggled the unlit cigarette he'd stuck in his mouth midway during the explanation□but didn't speak. I'd said everything there was to say, including about Senjogahara, and didn't have any more cards to play.

A vague awkwardness drifted in the air.

Normally Mèmè Oshino gabbed more than he should as if he were

born full-formed from a tongue, but he sometimes sank into these deep silences, which made him really hard to deal with… He was cheerful and happy-go-lucky on the surface, but at times like these, I wondered if he might not be an awfully gloomy guy at heart.

"The bandage," Oshino said at last. "Could you undo that bandage for me, missy?"

"Oh, okay."

Kanbaru glanced at me beseechingly. To put her at ease, I told her, *It's all right.* At that, she started to unravel her bandage using her right hand. *Whip whip.*

Then the beastly hand appeared.

Without being prompted, she rolled her sleeve up all the way to her upper arm. She bent her elbow, as if to indicate where the monster's arm and her human arm connected.

Taking a step forward she asked Oshino, "Like this?"

"…Yes, that's good. I see. That's what I thought."

"What you thought?" I cut in. "And what's as you thought, Oshino? Damn you, acting as inscrutable as ever you constantly leave people hanging on your words. Pretending to be omniscient can't be that fun, now."

"Don't prod me like that. You're feeling spirited, Araragi. Something good happen to you?" Spitting out the cigarette in his mouth without ever having lit it well, actually, I've never seen Oshino smoking one he directed his trademark flippant and frivolous smirk at me. "Araragi, and you too, missy. To start off with a correction that isn't a Monkey's Paw."

"Wha?"

Oshino had overturned the premise out of the blue—and I was shocked. Kanbaru looked like she'd been caught off-guard, too.

"There've been so many versions since Jacobs that it's hard to know what's true without seeing one for yourself—but from what little I know, I've never heard of the Monkey's Paw combining with the owner's arm. A crab for missy tsundere and a monkey for missy here would be like the old Japanese folktale and downright neat, but the world isn't so accommodating. You researched it yourself, missy, didn't you? And found nothing? No story where the Monkey's Paw merges with the owner. If there is one, that means uneducated old me has a big hole in his knowledge."

"…I did some research, but I was still in grade school."

"That's what I thought. So how did you get it into your head that it's a Monkey's Paw? Your mother *absolutely* must not have said such a thing to you… But I guess the conditions did match by and large."

"The conditions?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"There are a pair of them in how *the story goes,* Araragi. The Monkey's Paw is an item with a story attached to it. It grants its owner's wishes, the story goes. But not in the way its owner intends, the story goes—was that it?"

Heh, Oshino snorted with an unpleasant smile.

It was the smile of someone with an awful personality.

Or may I say, rotten to the core.

"I suppose it was a convenient interpretation for you, missy—or maybe a comforting one? It doesn't really matter. What's for sure, though, is that it's not a Monkey's Paw—originally it was mummified, right? And it gained life by melding with you. Then—my guess is that it's

a Rainy Devil."

"Rei...?" I blurted out when he spoke the name, but without allowing me a question, or even a moment, Oshino pushed on.

"So, Araragi. Have you read *Faust*?"

"Huh?"

"Thank you for the reaction, I see that you haven't. In fact, it seems like you haven't even heard of it. But I'm not the least bit surprised, not anymore. I've decided to get accustomed to these reactions of yours. What about you, missy? Have you read *Faust*?"

"Ah, umm." Kanbaru sounded surprised to be put on the spot but replied, as if it were a spinal reflex, "No, I'm not very well read, so I haven't. Of course, I'm familiar with the plot and rough outline of the tale."

"I see. No, that's par for the course. Yup, yup. Usually, a high schooler would at least know that much. Uh oh, how embarrassing, Araragi."

"Don't make fun of him! He just happened not to know, that's all! To begin with, he's not someone you can fit into existing frameworks like 'reading'!"

Suddenly incensed by Oshino's words, Kanbaru had raised her voice to scold him. Puzzled by her unlikely reaction, he turned his eyes toward me for an explanation.

I couldn't bring myself to meet them.

…Kanbaru.

I appreciated that she was getting mad on my behalf… I never imagined someone getting mad on your behalf would be so heartening, but yelling at Oshino there came too close to agreeing that I'm stupid…

“Kanbaru,” I said. “Could you please drop that routine for now? It’s amusing, yeah, but if you pull that every time Oshino makes fun of me, we’re never going to get anywhere …”

“Hm. I see. Profound words, befitting someone like you who faces any person with an open heart. Honestly, I struggle to accept your wisdom, as lacking in virtue and as quick to spite as I am, but if you say so, I’ll restrain myself and persevere.” Kanbaru nodded and bobbed her head in a bow to Oshino. “I’m sorry.”

She was a girl who could say sorry.

Good girl.

“…No, I don’t mind,” Oshino excused her. “And it was amusing. But considering that one of your arms has turned out that way, you’re a spirited missy. Something good happen to you? Well, in any case *Faust*. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the leading author of the Storm and Stress, or *Sturm und Drang* epoch, and his career-crowning achievement was the drama *Faust*. It’s about do you think you could tell him, missy? Whatever you know is fine.”

“Um, sure.”

Kanbaru looked at me hesitantly.

She seemed almost apologetic.

Like when she gave me the outline of Jacobs’ “The Monkey’s Paw,” Suruga Kanbaru’s personality was such that she couldn’t instruct her elders about anything without feeling presumptuous.

“As Mister Oshino said, it’s Goethe’s masterpiece, and…well, to mention a simple characteristic, it’s a story split into two parts. *Urfaust* and *Faust, a Fragment* led to *Faust, Part One* and *Faust, Part Two*. It’s a massive accomplishment that took him over sixty years to complete. I

can only bow to it. Goethe is also famous for *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Elective Affinities,* but if we were to pick a single work he put his whole body and soul into, the unanimous answer would be *Faust.* The protagonist, Doctor Faust, sells his soul to a devil, Mephistopheles, in order to gain all knowledge—and that ought to do for an introduction. I won't go into details because I don't want to spoil it, but *Part One* is about his romance with the commoner Gretchen, while *Part Two* depicts the establishment of an ideal nation. It's generally read as a sort of philosophy or, I should say, a narrative about the pursuit of knowledge. I'm sure you're aware, but it even gave rise to the expression 'Faustian impulse,' which describes the drive, the intellectual desire to know and experience everything."

"……"

Why in the world did this jock junior of mine think that her senior who hadn't heard of *Faust* knew of any "Faustian impulse"?

Oshino took it from there. "The heart of the story is that he sells his soul to the devil—Doctor Faust tries to fulfill his namesake impulse by having his wish granted that way… Of course, if you want to learn what happens in the end, Araragi, I recommend that you head to your nearest bookstore. But yeah, that's what it is. Missy's explanation is what you'd consider common knowledge, so if you know that much, it makes my job easier. I'm impressed that she was able to give such an eloquent speech about it despite not having read the book. If there's anything I should add, it's a bit that surprisingly few people know about—you'd find it in any commentary about Goethe, of course, but people these days don't read the classics. I'm not talking about you, missy, but people think there's no reason to go through and actually read a famous story

when they feel like they already have. So yes, you can't blame people for not knowing, but the *Faust* story is based on a real person."

"What? Really?" Kanbaru sounded surprised.

As her *Faust*-ignorant senior, I didn't even know why that should be surprising.

"Johann Faust. It's said he lived during the Renaissance period… While I say he was real, there are different theories about that, but stories about him ended up turning into folklore. A wandering physician or magician who, yes, sells his soul to the devil Mephistopheles, and in exchange for all kinds of knowledge and experience, promises to act as an enemy of Christians, for twenty-four years he lives according to those 'Faustian impulses' and the moment the contract expires, he meets a sad end. Look it up yourself, you can find the details in *Doctor Faustus.*"

"Huh…I didn't know."

Kanbaru sounded impressed by Oshino's trivia. Putting aside *Faust,* the story did have to do with folklore, his field of expertise, so this level of erudition was nothing new, but at this rate was she going to start flattering him, too? In fact, I didn't understand Kanbaru's standards for that. It wasn't like she indiscriminately bombarded everyone she met with praise…

"I was convinced Goethe had come up with the whole thing himself," she said. "But he'd based the thing on local legends."

"Well, he arranged a lot of the story in his own way, so at the end of the day, it's the Goethe edition of *Doctor Faust.* It's similar to Dazai's 'Run, Melos!' or Akutagawa's 'Rashomon.' The medieval folktale and Akutagawa's version feel pretty different, don't they? Same deal. The Faust legend has been turned into stories by lots of other people, too. A

famous instance would be the English author Marlowe. Do you know Marlowe? Not Raymond Chandler's Phillip Marlowe. Christopher Marlowe. He's often spoken of as a forerunner of Shakespeare, but he did write *Doctor Faustus.*"

"It's kind of interesting that it was Faust who was the doctor," Kanbaru noted, a bit of bashfulness sneaking into her voice.

Huh, Oshino tilted his head in puzzlement, and I could tell that the reason for her bashfulness was lost on him.

"But…Oshino," I attempted to wade into their exchange, afraid that we were getting off track, though I still didn't know much about *Faust.* "So what? I don't mind that you're as frustratingly longwinded as ever, but I don't see how it has anything to do with Kanbaru's current predicament. I think we've gotten derailed and are skidding sideways. Yeah, the part where the devil grants wishes in exchange for your soul resembles the Monkey's Paw, but it's not like Kanbaru's arm is the arm of this Mephistopheles from *Faust,* right? As if it's not a Monkey's Paw but the hand of the devil□"

"Well, that's exactly it, Araragi. You're on point today."

Oshino□

Pointed his finger at me pretentiously.

"The hand of the devil on missy here, whose name starts with the character for 'god,' seems to line up a little too perfectly, but it's not as bad as a crab-monkey spat or what happened with that lost girl the other day. It's just a plain old hint this time around. Mephistopheles isn't particularly terrifying, as far as devils go□he's more of a vulgar one. Low-ranking, or maybe not part of the rankings at all, just a familiar. That would normally make it extremely difficult to identify its exact

category, but a raincoat-wearing devil with a monkey arm narrows it down, of course—and if it merges with its owner, then it's a Rainy Devil."

A Rainy Devil.

"It's not a Monkey's Paw, it's a Devil's Hand. Ha hah, isn't this much simpler if you think of it that way? I mean, why would an ape grant human wishes without asking for anything in return? It's said the Monkey's Paw grants them because an old Indian ascetic imbued it with mystical power, but you don't need any explanation or reputation if it's a devil. Of course it'll grant wishes, it gets a soul in return."

"A soul—"

"What kind of devil wouldn't grant three wishes in exchange for a soul?" Oshino puffed a laugh through his nose. He was in full mockery mode. "Anyway, the Monkey's Paw is a right hand, not a left hand."

"…Really?"

"It's an item you hold with your right hand to use, so I assume that it's a right hand itself. But a Devil's Hand. It might not be a devil, taxonomically speaking, but I'm still surprised. You might not be shocked by much these days, Araragi, since you already encountered a vampire…but it's incredible to come across such a devil in Japan. It's a notable find. Though, of course, there's no shortage of Japanese *yokai* that would grant wishes in that manner. I don't know, what with li'l missy class president, li'l missy tsundere, and our li'l lost girl…this is one strange town. Seriously. How's it all going to end, with someone summoning the ruler of all hell to this place? …Missy, you said your mother gave you that left hand, yes? Kanbaru must be your father's surname. Do you know your mother's maiden name?"

“In fact—um, it’s a bit of an unusual name.” Kanbaru spoke slowly as if she were trying to remember. “I think it was ‘Gaen.’ *Ga* as in the phrase ‘hell or high water’ and *en* as in ‘smoke screen.’ Toé Gaen was her full maiden name.”

“…Huh. Oh, all right. And Toé must be written with the characters for ‘far’ and the one for ‘river’ used in *Yangtze*. The same way you’d write Totomi, the name of the old Japanese province. So that’s where your name comes from. Ha hah, nicely done.”

“Of course, after she got married, she was Toé Kanbaru. Why does that matter, though, Mister Oshino?”

“Why does it matter? Did you just ask me that? Oh, no, it doesn’t matter at all. I was trying to fill some time, it doesn’t have anything to do with your situation. And who cares about that background stuff in this case. So, Araragi, and you too, missy. Now you know everything. Whether that hand is a Monkey’s Paw or a Devil’s Hand might not make a difference to you, but having come here to visit me, what’s your plan going forward?”

“What do you mean—”

“You see, Araragi, I am what you might call an expert in this field. As a semi-passable excuse for an authority, in situations like these, I’m not opposed to helping out.”

“You—” Kanbaru leaned forward. “You’d save me?”

“I’ll do no such thing. I’ll only help out. You’re going to get saved all on your own, missy. You’ve come to the wrong place if you’re seeking salvation, and it wouldn’t be my scene. But considering the situation—Araragi, what should I do?” Oshino asked in a mean-spirited tone—but then fell silent, as if he hadn’t meant it rhetorically and were

really waiting on my answer. Why was that? What should he do… Wasn't it obvious?

"Hey, Oshino…"

"I'm wondering how exactly I should help, Araragi. Should I help missy's second wish come true? Or should I help annul it? Should I help turn her left arm back to normal? All of the above? That might be a little too greedy—but what I can say is that none of the above is going to be simple."

"Well…um."

If I said all of the above—would that come to pass?

But.

"There are two easy ways to solve this phenomenon for the time being," Oshino said. "The first is for you to be killed one night by the monster in the raincoat—the Rainy Devil. That will turn missy's arm back to normal and probably grant her wish. The other is to take that beastly left arm that's turned into an aberration and to lop it off."

"L-Lop it off?" I started fretting at Oshino's alarming proposal. "… Can you cut off just the part that belongs to this monkey—or devil? Will her old arm grow back?"

"It's not a lizard's tail, so it's not going to be that convenient. Still, an arm is a small price to pay to solve this whole situation," he said casually—but it was no joke.

You got what you paid for, with a vengeance…

Plus, it would be bad enough for anyone, but even worse for Kanbaru. If we did that, she'd never be able to play basketball again. Given how the sport had saved her, and how it continued to sustain her, the proposal really didn't bear voicing even if it came to mind.

“A-Ah,” Kanbaru spoke up. “That, I don’t think I could□”

“You tried to kill another human being, all right? It would only be fair,” Oshino tossed the harsh words at her when she immediately balked at the idea□he was merciless at such moments. He’d acted the same way with Hanekawa and Senjogahara□

“Then again,” he said, “Araragi getting killed is nice and simple as far as solutions go.”

“H-Hey, Oshino, I take your point, but hold on. She tried to kill another human being… That’s me you’re talking about, right? But that’s not what she wished for. She only wanted to be by Senjogahara’s side□”

“Only to be by her side? What a riot,” Oshino continued to me in his harsh tone. “You’re so kind, Araragi. You’re a good, kind person□what a good and kind person. Makes me sick, really. How many more people do you have to hurt with that kindness until you’re satisfied? It was the same with little Shinobu. Only to be by her side? Did you believe those saccharine words just the way they came out of missy’s mouth?”

“…You’re saying that wasn’t it?” I asked Oshino and glanced at Kanbaru. She was silent. “Hey, Kanbaru□”

“For example, Araragi. You don’t find it odd? That story of her first wish when she was in grade school. Why do you think the left hand didn’t just make her faster and roughed people up instead?”

“Well□that’s because the Monkey’s Paw grants its owner’s wishes in an unintended way□”

“But it’s not a Monkey’s Paw,” Oshino declared. “This was in exchange for a soul. The wish ought to be granted exactly as it’s made. The Rainy Devil may be a low-level demon, and it may have a nasty

habit of rushing to violence, but a contract is a contract. A deal is a deal. If your wish is to be faster, that's normally what should happen. How does roughing up her classmates make her any faster? Doesn't that causality seem off? It's obvious that beating them up would only get her placed in another group."

"……" I couldn't argue with him if he put it that way. "Then why? Why did the monster in the raincoat go to her classmates and□"

"Because she wanted to beat the shit out of them, of course. Unable to fit in at her new school, missy was constantly being teased. She says it wasn't what you'd call bullying, but that's what bullied kids say. If you've just had your parents die on you and you're persecuted at school on top of that, wanting revenge isn't weird at all. If anything, it'd be weird if she didn't want any."

"I…" Kanbaru said□then fell silent.

How had she wanted to explain herself?

Why did she decide not to after all?

What did she realize?

Oshino went on. "I'm sure it wasn't a conscious decision. I do think it was in the realm of the unconscious, okay? If it had been intentional, she'd know. I'm sure the way she saw it, she made a wish to become faster. On the face of it, yes, but not on the flip side. Behind her wish was a dark desire to get back at her classmates□to beat them up. That's what missy wished for, even if it was unconscious. The devil saw through to that desire. It read what was on the flip side. But deep down, missy must have known that, all right? It might have been unconscious, but those were her honest feelings all the same. But not wanting to accept that, she sought a different interpretation for the phenomenon…

and arrived at the Monkey's Paw. Not the stuff about *granting a wish,* but *defying the owner's will*—that was the axial part, wasn't it? A psychological excuse that it wasn't her intention at all to attack her classmates. Well, that kind of thing is important."

A psychological excuse.

A question of interpretation.

"It's not just true for the Monkey's Paw, most cases involving aberrations that grant wishes end horribly for the protagonist—and in that sense, when missy looked them up in grade school, she could easily have found a different one. She just happened to come across Jacobs' 'The Monkey's Paw.' But what would you say? Have things turned out horribly for missy? Is she miserable because her wish came true? Araragi, would you say missy is truly miserable because those classmates who teased her were made to suffer? Isn't the normal response to that a quick and tidy 'serves them right'?"

"The normal response… But Oshino—"

"Ha hah, Araragi, are you wondering what evidence I have to be so sure? Well, it's obvious if you actually listen to her story. Clear as day. That arm of hers…how was it in grade school, again?"

"……"

Now that he mentioned it.

The mummified hand that only went down to its wrist at the time—how was it then?

"I heard nothing about bandages—" pointed out Oshino, "and until she went to class the next day and found out those four were absent, she didn't notice that it had happened, right? If her left hand turned out like

that, she surely would have. What does that mean? You see, when her classmates got beaten up that night, her wish came true. The aberration merged with missy's left hand overnight without her realizing it, and likewise unattached overnight. It unattached *with a bit of her soul equivalent to the wish*□and grew from the left wrist into a forearm, I bet."

"…Wait, Oshino, that would mean□"

It made sense.

But his argument suggested…

"Your initial thinking was on the mark, Araragi. You'd actually arrived at the right answer for once. Didn't I tell you? You're on point today. There was no need to get tied up into knots, you just had to use your common sense to think it through. You're such a chump to believe your assailant's excuses. You'll never make it onto a jury, Araragi. You stole away her idol for yourself. It's hardly bizarre if she felt murderously jealous. There's no way missy's own intention had no part in this, all of it was exactly her intention. Left hands don't have any."

So said Oshino.

The Rainy Devil is apparently a very violent devil—there's nothing it loves more than human malice and hostility, vengeance and chagrin, jealousy and envy, negative emotions in general. It sees into the darkest side of a person, provokes it, draws it out, then makes it real. It listens to people's wishes out of spite and grants them out of spite. The contract itself—is in the form of three granted wishes in exchange for a human soul. It's said that once the three wishes are granted—it takes that person's life and body. In other words, he or she becomes the devil by the end. That was its nature. So if Kanbaru had made a wish to resolve Senjogahara's secret upon learning about it a year ago, it probably wouldn't have been granted. The Rainy Devil can only grant violent, negative wishes.

The devil reads the flip side of a wish.

There's always something—on the back.

She wanted to become faster because she hated her classmates.

She wanted to be by Senjogahara's side—because she hated Koyomi Araragi.

Yes, it reads the backside.

Yes, it looks at the backside.

It sees into our unconscious desires.

The devil—sees through us.

She may not have regretted stepping away—but resented anyone stepping into that position. If someone could, why not her?

Why couldn't it be me.

The Rainy Devil.

A devil told of in Europe since long ago.

It's often depicted as a monkey wearing a raincoat.

In that sense, it might be correct to call that left hand a monkey's paw□but either way, both the first and the second wishes had been Kanbaru's own unconscious ones, clear but hidden.

Against the classmates who teased her.

And me.

Her classmates in grade school had gotten off with injuries, while I was nearly killed… Was that due to a difference in how strongly she felt, the volume of her negative emotions? What I'd posited about Kanbaru's maturation as an athlete must have had something to do with it too, but there was also a greater psychological factor.

Well, anyway, Oshino was right.

Maybe I hadn't given it enough thought.

If Kanbaru had really wished to the Rainy Devil to be by Senjogahara's side, it didn't make sense for her to feel concerned about my safety□given the grade school episode, her violent left hand would try to eliminate Koyomi Araragi, but how could Kanbaru, from her standpoint, know that for sure? Precisely how her left hand would grant the wish, in what unintended manner it would go about it, should have been opaque to her.

But she unconsciously knew what she unconsciously wished for.

She knew that I was in danger.

If the monster in the raincoat didn't appear before me as soon as the aberration melded with her left hand, that was because Kanbaru was trying to control the impulse, according to Oshino. She was right on the

edge, in conflict with it, struggling against it.

“Working hard to become faster is like the ultimate in self-regarding excuses. The paw wasn’t doing anything because she made her own wish come true—what a patently ridiculous idea. Missy herself might’ve believed it, might’ve wanted to believe it, and that was by no means wrong, but the wish the Rainy Devil violently granted was the backside rather than the front. Still, her stance of always having managed on her own had a good effect this time around…and while the aberration merged with her arm, she was able to suppress it. When you look at it that way, aberrations like these are really like items. The owner’s mindset is a factor…but to be realistic about it, in this case it’s just an arm, so the Rainy Devil must be unable to exercise too much of its power, a devil though it may be. It couldn’t draw out of her an unconscious to surpass her consciousness. In other words, her left hand didn’t activate while she was concerned about your wellbeing. All of her stalking since four days ago had exactly the effect she wanted, though it might not have been missy’s intention, since all of this occurred in the unconscious. But—yesterday, was it? She learned that you and li’l missy tsundere would be meeting all alone for a so-called study session. Until then, your dating was only a rumor, it might have been untrue, but that’s when, alas, missy became certain. And—she couldn’t hold back anymore. It’s exactly as you surmised, Araragi.”

The devil found an opening and wormed its way into her heart.

Oshino didn’t put it that way, of course.

He thoroughly despised that sort of spoiled weakness.

But—

It was jealousy, from beginning to end—and Kanbaru had been

saying as much.

She'd been saying it.

"Mm, that ought to do," I told Shinobu.

I'd had her suck my blood right up to the limit, locked in an embrace, and now I tapped her tiny back twice. Shinobu gently removed her fangs from the two holes in my neck and licked clean the few drops of blood that dribbled in the process. Maybe I needed to start wondering if our embrace fell under Senjogahara's definition of cheating, but since this was the only way the task could be accomplished, I'd have to beg her to let it go. Unlike during spring break, Shinobu's figure was now so minute and helpless, and hugging her as I did felt like hugging fog or mist, there was so little in my hands.

"…Oops."

I stood up from my crouched position and felt a little dizzy. It was natural, of course, but I did feel almost anemic right after having my blood sucked and this time, especially, I'd given her a lot.

Nearly five times more than the default amount.

I hopped up and down a bit.

Then again, my senses and bodily sensation didn't feel much different from usual… All of my stats got raised across the board, so it wasn't easy to discern exactly how I compared to my normal state.

Shinobu was already back to sitting on the floor.

Sitting there…with both of her arms wrapped around her legs as if to confirm her own presence.

She didn't even look in my direction.

"……"

A good and kind person, huh?

I could insist that I wasn't either of those things all day long, but when it came down to it, the prime victim was still this blond vampire… I supposed I couldn't blame Oshino for his cutting remark.

Forget me. For Shinobu…

I grabbed her goggled helmet and gave it a good shake right and left. For a while, she ignored it and didn't react, but it must have gotten legitimately annoying because she swatted my hand away.

Yeah.

Satisfied for the time being, I did as Oshino advocated and left without parting words, turning my back on her and climbing the stairs down to the third floor from the landing. I'd bring her a present next time, maybe donut holes or something, I thought as I bypassed the third floor and headed to the second.

Across from me, in front of a door on the opposite side of the hallway awaited Mèmè Oshino, his arms crossed, leaning back against a wall, casually dangling one foot in the air.

"Hey. I've been waiting, Araragi. Looks like you took longer than expected."

"Yup. I had a little trouble figuring out the limit. I might have shorted her…but it's better than letting her go overboard. For me and for Shinobu."

"Hmm. I guess that's true, but you don't need to be so sensitive about little Shinobu. Because her existence is bound by my name, nothing extreme is going to happen. Naming is taming. If anything, I'm more worried about her starving. You're going to be grappling and

fighting it out with a devil in a moment, Araragi, so you can't afford such concerns, I don't think? You don't want to end up being the comic relief. Hitting the ceiling still wouldn't give you good odds for this match, okay? Even if your opponent is no more than a left arm."

…Our measure against the Rainy Devil.

An authentic exorcism is a major affair that takes lots of time and effort, and despite the Rainy Devil's low ranking, it would be no cakewalk even for Oshino. This was coming from him, so I took it with a grain of salt□but I was convinced, at least, that he didn't intend to partake this time.

Unlike with Senjogahara's case.

You could call Senjogahara's crab another kind of aberration that granted a wish□but that was a god, and this was a devil. Even an amateur like myself could tell it wasn't going to be simple.

Kanbaru, with "god" in her name, and a devil.

It was not so much a hint as plain irony.

But□we didn't have the time or the effort to spare.

If we didn't hurry, my life might come to an end that very night. Me getting killed, or Kanbaru's left arm getting cut off□unfortunately, I wasn't so unattached to living as to accept the former manner of resolving the story. But cutting off Kanbaru's left arm was flat out of the question.

Which left us with option three.

"The contract, huh?" I said. "Well, I hope that's all it takes for the devil to go back to its demonic or spiritual or whatever world."

"The demonic and the spiritual aren't different worlds, they refer to 'here'□but the complicated stuff will start to feel like an argument we've

already had, so maybe next time. It's going to work, I'll guarantee you that much, Araragi. *If the contract can't be fulfilled*—it becomes void. I won't call it a 'cooling off' period, but missy's wish will be properly invalidated too. The poor incompetent devil who didn't cut it will slink off without a word."

The devil will slink off.

If it can't fulfill the contract.

"In other words—*if the devil can't kill me.*"

"Hyup." Oshino chuckled. "Having given little Shinobu as much blood as possible only means so much, though… If you went about it like you had a mere tenth of the power you manifested over spring break, when you were actually a vampire, you'd still be overestimating your capabilities."

"…That's a pretty bleak fraction."

"But you're facing *just the left hand* of that Rainy Devil—you'd have no chance against the whole thing, but with the 'dead weight' of a human being on top of it, I'd say you have a ten or twelve or fourteen to one chance of winning," Oshino assured most ambiguously.

The Rainy Devil is a completely different type of aberration from the Monkey's Paw—the only trait the two have in common is that they grant wishes, and the devil, as you can tell from its association with a raincoat, has a full set of body parts (how you define 'body' is relevant here, but let's leave that aside). Yet I was facing just the left hand—and it had been mummified, too, probably thanks to a reliable seal, according to Oshino.

"Missy's mother's lineage seems to have been the issue—could it also have been why they ended up eloping? Well, I don't mean to expose or

nose around a stranger's family situation with an offhanded guess. A mummified devil is actually quite a feat, though I've heard of mummified mermaids and the like. Hm, personally, if it only went down to the wrist when missy got it, what happened to *the remaining parts* does make me curious."

Mother…

Hitagi Senjogahara, Mayoi Hachikuji.

Both of their aberrations□involved their mothers.

Suruga Kanbaru was continuing that trend, then.

Apparently, just like her father, her mother had been disowned by her parents after eloping and Kanbaru was completely estranged from that side of her family, so there didn't seem to be any hope of finding out more…

"By the way," I asked, "what if this Rainy Devil had all of its body parts? Could it even beat Shinobu at her peak?"

"Not a chance. It's a low-level fiend at the end of the day, toothless against a real vampire. We aren't even talking about Mephistopheles here, so it'd take her no more than a couple of seconds. She'd pulverize every one of its assembled limbs, slurp up every fluid in its body, and that would be it. Have you forgotten that our little Shinobu used to be a fearsome, legendary vampire? Of course it'd be no match for her. Given the Rainy Devil's ranking, I'd say that even li'l missy class president's lust-besotted cat was easily stronger than it. Oh, but don't try to have Shinobu help out, okay? That may let us defeat the thing, but we'd have to cut off missy's arm for real. You, yourself, defeating it□that's the whole point."

"The Rainy Devil takes over a person's body by granting wishes,

right? Every time it grants one, you get closer to the devil… The mummified hand must have grown from the wrist to the elbow because it granted Kanbaru's first wish, but then what, Oshino? If her second wish, her murderous hatred for me, and some third wish were granted, what would happen to her? At that rate, wouldn't taking over her just mean growing up to her shoulder or so?"

"I can only reply to that question like a bureaucrat: there's no precedent I can refer to. But considering the ratio, it seems reasonable to presume as you just did that it'll only go up to the shoulder even if it takes over her. Still, Araragi, that doesn't change anything. Being usurped up to your shoulder is the same as being usurped whole. It's like a publicly traded company having thirty percent of its stock acquired."

"…I guess."

"Her soul would get extracted either way, and she'd be an empty husk. Oh, I'll hold on to your bag and any valuables, Araragi. It'll be hard for you to maneuver carrying all that."

"Oh, yeah… Thanks. Could you take these, then?"

I pulled my cell phone and house keys out of my back and jacket pockets, tossed them into my backpack, and handed it to Oshino. *Okay,* he said, slinging it over his shoulder.

"But Araragi□can I ask you just one question?"

"What is it?"

"Why help even someone who tried to kill you? It might have been unconscious, *the flip side of her wish*□but missy hated you. She saw you as a hated rival in love." His usual mean jabbing□didn't seem to be what

this was. “To begin with, why did you decide to hear missy out when you learned that it was her in the raincoat? Normally, at that point, there’d be no more need for questions or answers—you ought to have skipped her right then and come straight to me.”

“…Everyone’s going to have someone they hate. That’s part of being alive. I don’t have any interest in being killed, but if Kanbaru was doing this because she pined for Senjogahara—”

For every aberration, there was a reason.

If that was her reason—

“—I can forgive her.”

If I was right from the start as Oshino said, then nothing had changed. I’d just gone back to the beginning, and Monkey’s Paws and Rainy Devils didn’t have anything to do with it. True, I hadn’t imagined that she saw me as her rival in love, but even then.

Underhanded calculations.

Scheming persistence.

Maybe I was a good and kind person, but I wasn’t exactly pure and virtuous like Hanekawa.

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

The girl with a pair of mismatched wings.

…If I was jealous of anyone, it was her.

I really was—envious, even.

“Oh. Well, if that’s what you’ve decided, Araragi, then sure. It’s fine by me and none of my business. In that case, get in there and help missy out. I should caution you, once you enter, you won’t be able to leave until it’s over. The door absolutely won’t open from inside. Brace yourself because escape is not an option. Think very well back to spring

break about situations from which there's no turning back, and be prepared, understand? …And of course, whatever happens, little Shinobu or I won't come save you. Don't forget that I'm an inordinate pacifist and an ill-timed humanitarian. I'm going up to the fourth floor to get some sleep once I see you enter this classroom, so the rest is up to you. No need to say bye to me when you leave, neither you nor missy. Little Shinobu will be asleep by then, too, so just leave on your own."

"…Sorry for the hassle."

"Don't mention it."

Oshino moved from his spot on the wall to open the door.

I slipped in without hesitation.

As soon as I did, Oshino shut the door.

I couldn't leave now.

A classroom located in the back of the second floor—it was laid out the exact same way as the fourth-floor classroom but was the only one in the entire ruins whose windows were sealed. That isn't to say that there weren't shards of glass all over the floor here too. Rather, numerous planks of thick wood were nailed over the empty window frames just like people used to do when hurricanes came along. So single-mindedly many boards that it made you wonder why. Once the door shut, not a ray of light shone in—it was already the middle of the night, but not even starlight.

It was pitch black.

But—I could see.

Just having given plenty of blood to Shinobu, I could see through the darkness. In fact, in my current state, I could see better in the dark—and I slowly took in my surroundings.

I found it in no time.

It was there, standing in the not-so-large classroom.

Raincoat.

"…Hey," I called out to it, but there was no response.

It seemed she was already in a trance.

The body was Suruga Kanbaru's but its left arm, and for now, its soul was the Rainy Devil's… If you're wondering about the raincoat, Kanbaru ran off to grab one from the nearest general store while I was having Shinobu drink my blood. You could say the raincoat wasn't necessary, or at least it was an optional, non-essential item, but it served as per usual a ceremonial purpose to set the mood and scene.

The desks and chairs in the classroom were in the way and had been removed so now only Kanbaru and I stood there. The Rainy Devil's *left arm* and a mock-vampire *nonhuman*.

Two beings that were not quite. It seemed like an even fight.

No actually, I couldn't let it be an even fight.

I had to overwhelm the devil.

Just like the night before, beneath the raincoat's hood lurked a deep pit, and I couldn't make out what was in there, let alone any expression.

"……"

The most standard measure against an aberration that grants wishes, like Rainy Devils and Monkey's Paws, is to wish for something it cannot grant.

A wish that's too grand.

Or a contradictory wish.

A wish that is completely impossible.

A wish that would put it in a double bind, between a rock and a hard place.

Like a bucket with no bottom, as Oshino put it. That lets you drive off the aberration, see beyond the aberration—or so he said.

But Kanbaru had already made her wish in this case—she wanted to be by Senjogahara's side. And for that—Koyomi Araragi was in the way. She hated Koyomi Araragi, and she wanted to kill Koyomi Araragi, she ended up wishing unconsciously. The Rainy Devil was trying to answer to that wish as stated.

A wish can't be canceled.

Since she did think it, even for a moment, it was too late.

In which case, the logic needed to be turned on its head.

The very same wish should be made impossible.

Koyomi Araragi should be an entity that no mere Rainy Devil could kill—

"I guess this is a case of being able to argue your way out of anything—a little on the sophistic side if you ask me, like we're monkeying around with the rules, but hey, if it works… Oops!"

I don't know what triggered it—but Raincoat suddenly leapt toward me. Suruga Kanbaru's jumping chops—amplified by the intensity of her hatred. Normally, the speed would have defied my eyes like the night before—but things were different now.

I could see just fine.

And also react—

"Wait, wh-whoa!"

With a centrifugal twist of my torso, I dodged Raincoat's left fist—a very close call. Completing the spin, I moved away—it was lame, but I

needed to regain my footing.

What was going on?

I wanted to say it was even faster than the night before□no, my eyes were still adjusting, that was all. Anyway, if I evaded Raincoat's left hand's attacks and waited for my opening, then targeted the "dead weight" that was Kanbaru's body, caught it, and pinned it down□

"……kk!"

It was already□on me.

Ridiculous, I didn't expect to overwhelm Raincoat when it came to speed, but mine ought to have been enhanced far beyond last night thanks to Shinobu, and yet, as easily as this□Raincoat brandished its left fist at me. I couldn't dodge to the left, I needed to get on its right somehow, outside□

The bared, dark and hairy arm grazed my cheek and missed. I felt like the gusts in its wake were ripping my body apart□but kicked at Raincoat's exposed flank.

…I'm sorry, Kanbaru!

I apologized to her in my heart.

As expected, apart from its left hand Raincoat was fairly normal□its body flew straight in the direction of my kick, lost its balance, and fell on all fours to the linoleum floor.

Indeed, controlling just the left arm posed a disadvantage for Raincoat. It was horribly imbalanced and obvious that the rest of the package couldn't keep up.

But then, what was up with its speed? Had Raincoat not been serious the night before? Did it get faster in response to my enhanced

abilities? But what need was there for an aberration to hold back?

I didn't get it.

I still didn't as Raincoat got up.

Hmm… Even ignoring the fact that the body was Kanbaru's, I couldn't bring myself to kick an opponent who was down…

I knew I had to, but I was reluctant, even though I couldn't afford to be in this case.

A good and kind person.

Ugh, I hated that label.

How nice that your lack of personality was getting smoothed over.

In a beeline, Raincoat's left fist smashed into my right shoulder this time that catapult of a fist. It must have aimed for my median line, but I was able to avoid that…not completely, though. I couldn't fully acquire it it was too fast. I hurtled back about ten feet… With my sense of equilibrium, I flipped midair and landed on my feet. Raincoat's left hand had turned my bicycle into a crumpled piece of paper and demolished a concrete wall, but unlike yesterday, my body neither flew an absurd distance nor got wrecked. I suffered some damage, of course, but not to the extent that I couldn't move. My shoulder was dislocated and probably also fractured, but it was nothing that my vampiric regeneration couldn't heal right away. The sharp pain went away in an instant, too. If anything felt nostalgic, this was it. Oh, I couldn't wait for sunrise… Just how badly was I gonna get burnt?

But I didn't have time to be thinking about that. Because Raincoat followed up where I landed and follow up, it did. Raincoat knew no doubt. Its left fist now went for my head. The punch caught me right in my face with its eyes that had yet to adjust. I was treated to the sound of

my nose snapping. That was in my current state, which meant a normal human head would have been blown to smithereens; the destructive force was that terrifying even to imagine. I pathetically crawled away to get some distance from Raincoat, and as I did, my broken nose healed. I loathed the feeling. It was as if I'd become an amoeba or something. And this was at a tenth—my spring break had been hell.

I was able to dodge the next punch.

But the one after that nicked me.

"……Dammit!"

Why?

Why couldn't I dodge them altogether?

Though the strikes themselves described efficient straight lines, Raincoat's overall attacking motion, merely thrusting out its left fist with such brute force I half-expected it to go flying off its shoulder like an anime robot's rocket-propelled punch, was crude—it didn't telegraph its movements, but that was all, and I should have been able to track it, so why couldn't I? Why couldn't I get out of its way? It was clearly several notches faster than the day before. Not so much its power…I could take one or two, no, a few dozen clean shots and still be in the fight with my current build, so why was just its speed so out of sight?

Something wasn't like yesterday…

Raincoat…

The bared left arm, the beastly hand.

…Its right arm was bare too, but like whatever lurked under the hood, it had the air of some deep pit that you could and could not see—wait, no. That was what had changed. Raincoat had been wearing

rubber gloves the day before—neither of its arms had been exposed. But what of it? Wearing rubber gloves shouldn't have slowed it down.

And then I realized.

I realized my mistake.

Not the rubber gloves—the rubber boots!

Kanbaru had only bought a raincoat at the general store… She hadn't gotten rubber gloves or rubber boots—not because we decided that setting the mood didn't require the whole getup, but simply because we didn't think of it. I didn't know how the original Rainy Devil was depicted, but the raincoat had been enough of a hint to tip off Oshino. If just a raincoat did a good enough job of expressing the aberration and its character, then Kanbaru and I weren't exactly amiss.

But—if Raincoat wasn't wearing rubber boots, then that meant it was wearing sneakers. One glance was all I needed to confirm the fact. Its feet weren't bare just because its hands were. Raincoat was still wearing the shoes that Kanbaru had on.

The unmistakably expensive sneakers.

Compared to rubber boots—they let you move at a different definition of speed.

Especially if you were an athlete of Suruga Kanbaru's caliber.

"…Yikes."

Openly shackling or binding Kanbaru's feet or attaching any kind of weight to her body would have been out given our strategy, or objective—but a simple pair of rubber boots was certainly a feasible handicap… Why had we gone and created conditions where Raincoat could make full and unfettered use of its powers? Suruga Kanbaru's body was supposed to serve as dead weight, to drag not her feet but her

left hand down, but instead she was acting as a nimble attachment to that arm!

Urk…

I couldn't believe how bad I was at closing the deal…

Just evading was no longer an option. Since my body wasn't going to accumulate any damage, I wouldn't be chipped to death like in a fighting game as long as I barely managed to avoid half of its attacks, but that wouldn't complete my assignment of pulling off *an overwhelming victory*. It didn't seem like an issue of my eyes adjusting. I needed to face Raincoat's attacks head-on even if both of us might go down as a result. I lowered my hips and held my hands out like a goalie preparing for a penalty kick—or was a man-to-man basketball defense the more appropriate analogy?

However, another catapult strike, a clear violation of the rules of basketball (what would that violation be called?), shot toward the base of my neck, and I tried to stop it with both of my hands, my right hand meeting Raincoat's fist, my left hand grabbing its wrist, and the rest of my body wrapping around its left arm—but didn't make it in time. No, in fact, my right and left hands did make it in time, but I couldn't stop the catapult. I felt a number of my finger bones breaking, then the left fist striking my collarbone immediately after. My body lurched backwards, but I somehow stood firm on my back foot—I hadn't stopped the blow but at least reduced its force before it reached my torso.

Before Raincoat could pull back its fist, I used both of my hands, their fingers already healed, to grab its left arm—finally accomplishing my initial goal of halting its movements. At last, I had gotten ahold of Raincoat. All right, and now—

“I’m sorry, Kanbaru!”

Apologizing out loud this time, and pinning the left arm with both of my hands as Raincoat struggled to shake free, I attacked its legs, stomach, and chest with three successive sidekicks. It was an impossible attack for a normal human body to perform given the way we’re built. Unlike Raincoat, who could only attack with its left fist, I could use all four of my limbs and had to make full use of my advantage.

Raincoat’s left arm flailed like mad.

It was vulnerable.

Oshino was right. I probably didn’t stand a chance against a fully formed Rainy Devil as I was, but I could overwhelm it if I denied it its left arm—the fist’s damage, I could heal instantly as long as I didn’t take multiple hits in a row, which meant the bigger threat was Kanbaru’s boosted leg strength, and the bit about her sneakers was indeed unexpected, but having trapped it like this—all I had to do was kick the Rainy Devil into submission. If it wouldn’t cry uncle, then until it was no more. It was nearly like torture, the right equivalent of *Suruga-toi,* so it didn’t feel great, but we weren’t going to tear off Kanbaru’s left arm, and we certainly weren’t going to end her life, so my only choice was to continue attacking and inflicting pain until the devil left her—

Raincoat’s legs buckled.

My constant low kicks were finally paying off—or so I thought, but it wasn’t the case. The leg that I—no, that it threw off balance came arcing at my jaw along the shortest and quickest possible route. Not its left arm, but its left leg—Kanbaru’s long leg threaded its way past the rest of my body to land a high roundhouse kick right on my temple. The force of the blow was of course nothing compared to the left arm’s, but

this was still Kanbaru's dash burst converted into attack power, plus I had been caught completely off guard.

My brain was rattled and my vision blurred for a moment. Damaging the sensory organs of a (mock) vampire was definitely effective—an important lesson I had learned over spring break.

I had to let go of Raincoat's left arm.

To defend against the kick that followed.

I held my arms out like a cross and took it, and while inferior to the left-arm catapult—the impact scrambled my thoughts due to its sheer inexplicability.

It could use more than its left arm?

But hadn't Oshino said "dead weight"?

"…Does this mean *what I think it does*?"

I could only come up with one possible answer.

If the Rainy Devil's source of energy was human negativity, then it was feeding off of Suruga Kanbaru's jealousy toward me—if the left fist was a catapult, then Kanbaru's body was the aircraft carrier itself. Her heated passions, her inflamed emotions created the high-pressure steam channeled into her muscles. That's why her body wasn't dragging the left arm down as dead weight—well, perhaps it did under normal circumstances but wasn't loath to mount a defense when the Rainy Devil was in a pinch?

No, that was sophistry.

If I was going to say that I forgave Kanbaru, I mustn't resort to arguments that circumvented the truth—it wasn't fair to describe it as some spinal reflex, like an electrical current jolting a frog's leg.

In other words.

Kanbaru's legs moved of her own will.

Suruga Kanbaru's will had a part in this.

Unconsciously, Kanbaru was refusing.

To lose her Rainy Devil left arm.

To let her second wish go unfulfilled.

To let me live.

She wasn't giving up Senjogahara.

"…Scheming persistence."

I understand how you feel.

So much that it hurts.

So much that I hurt.

Because I lost, threw something away, too.

Because I'll never get it back.

For some reason, Raincoat stood still. Having sent its left fist after me so tenaciously in simple straight lines, like a simple magnet being drawn toward an object, now it stood unmoving almost as if it were puzzling over something.

Or maybe.

As if it were doubtful.

Raincoat's unhesitant movements had stopped.

…Suruga Kanbaru.

Hitagi Senjogahara's junior.

The basketball star.

Please, just cut it off she'd said.

Right after Oshino had revealed the truth, that her left arm wasn't a Monkey's Paw but a Devil's Hand, that her wishes had been granted as she'd made them, after the awful truth that didn't need to be exposed

had been…she'd cast her eyes down for a few seconds, faced up bravely, and looked at Oshino and me in turn to say so.

"I don't need this left hand."

For once, without that smile of hers.

In a flat, plain, unemotional tone—oddly enough, the current-day personality of the senior she admired so.

"Please, just cut it off. I want you to sever it. I beg you. I know it's a hassle, but I beg you. I can't cut off my own arm…"

"S-Stop it."

I hastened to push her outstretched arm back toward her. The hair felt disgusting as it brushed against my hand. It was creepy.

It was scary.

"Stop being ridiculous—I couldn't ever. What about basketball?" I asked.

"It's like Mister Oshino just said. I tried to kill another human being. I think it's only fair."

"N-No—really, Kanbaru, I don't mind at all—"

Laughable. Clownish.

How far from the point could I get?

It wasn't about whether I minded or not.

What's more, whether I forgave her or not had nothing to do with it, either—the question was whether Suruga Kanbaru could forgive Suruga Kanbaru.

The girl who didn't want to injure her classmates and so kept running.

Who suppressed and overwhelmed all negative emotions.

She who had sealed them away.

That strength of will□also bound her.

Castigated her.

“A-Anyway,” I said, “there’s no way we’re going to cut it off. Don’t be ridiculous. What are you thinking? You’re an idiot, a real idiot. Way to be simplistic about things. How can you take such an idea seriously?”

“Ah. You’re right, cutting off my arm isn’t something to impose on people. It’s not a favor you can carry out just because someone asked, is it? Okay, I’ll think of a way on my own. I’m sure it can be done with the help of a car or a train.”

“That’s□”

A car or a train?

That amounted to suicide.

It wasn’t suicidal□but plain suicide.

“If she wants to cut it off, there’s a good way, isn’t there,” Oshino interrupted with a reminder. “Why aren’t you telling her, Araragi? How inconsiderate of you when someone’s clearly in distress. You just have to get little Shinobu to cooperate. A heart under her blade□with that prized sword of hers, we’d be able to sever that left arm with no time for missy to feel any pain. Little Shinobu’s blade might not have the edge it once boasted, but cutting off a slender arm would be as easy as pie, or slicing tofu□”

“Shut up, Oshino! Hey, Kanbaru! Stop tormenting yourself about this! You shouldn’t be feeling responsible, not one bit□isn’t that obvious?! This is all because of the Monkey’s Paw…I mean, some aberration called the Rainy Devil□”

“The aberration only granted her wish, didn’t it?”

Oshino wasn’t shutting up.

Eloquently, loquaciously, he weaved his words.

“It only gave her what she wanted, yes? Wasn’t it the same with li’l missy tsundere? It’s not like what happened to you over spring break, Araragi. It’s nothing like little Shinobu’s case—Araragi, *you didn’t wish upon an aberration.*”

“……”

“Which is why—you don’t understand how she feels. Not her remorse, and not her regrets. Not in the slightest,” he told me. “By the way, in the original ‘The Monkey’s Paw,’ after having a first and a second wish granted, the third wish of the first person to use the paw was to die. I don’t think I need to explain the full significance of that?”

“Oshino—”

What he said was right.

But, Oshino, you’re mistaken.

Facing off against Raincoat—immobile like we were in a standoff, I took my time recollecting.

Because I actually do understand.

So much that it hurts, that my wounded heart hurts.

Hitagi Senjogahara’s feelings.

And Suruga Kanbaru’s, too, okay?

No, maybe I don’t, after all.

Maybe it’s nothing more than a conceited and misguided notion.

But—

We bear the same kind of pain.

We share it.

Who’s to say you won’t use a wish-granting item that presents itself to you? Like with my spring break, though it might not have been

wished for. Even the pure and virtuous Hanekawa was bewitched by a cat due to the slightest discord and torsion□

At its base, my relationship with Shinobu was no different from Senjogahara's relationship with the crab, or Kanbaru's with the devil.

"I don't mind, Araragi," she said.

"Well, I do□how could I not? What are you saying? And what about Senjogahara? I wanted you and her to□"

"I'm done. About her too. I'm done now." Her words must have literally pained her. "It's fine. I'll give up."

No way.

Giving up isn't fine at all.

Make your own wishes come true□that's why your mother gave you that mummified devil. It couldn't have been to teach you to give up on your dreams□

So don't make that face.

Stop looking like a deep pit where your face should be.

You can't ever give up on anything on the verge of crying like that.

A rainy devil□and a weepy devil.

Its origin is said to be a child who ran away from home after getting in a fight with his parents over nothing one drizzling day. He got lost in the mountains and was killed and eaten by a pack of wild monkeys. Mysteriously, no one from his family or settlement could recall the child's name□

"…Bastard!"

Unable to take our standoff, mentally□unable to bear the shadow play of thoughts that beleaguered me, I charged Raincoat. Including the night before, it was the very first time I went on the offensive instead of

just reacting. You could say that the pressure of maintaining an interceptive posture was getting to be too much.

Staying on our feet wouldn't do. Even if I trapped its left arm again, a kick would follow without delay. I needed to go at Raincoat with a mind to pin it down like this was judo or wrestling□

I spread my arms out as though to clamp down on Raincoat, but I couldn't catch it□had it moved left or right, I might have been able to respond, but that's not what it did. Yet it didn't back away, either□in that case I would have only needed to take another few steps.

Raincoat had jumped.

It jumped□and with both of its feet stuck to the classroom's ceiling□stayed up there and dashed. *Tup, tup, tup, tup, tup, tup,* it defied gravity□and dashed across the ceiling, ignoring the universal law.

Then it came down□and landed on the floor.

And jumped sideways next.

And landed on the rickety blackboard□and jumped again□and landed on the thick planks sealing a window shut□and jumped again□and was back on the ceiling.

Every which way, plus a few more.

With bewildering speed□Raincoat jumped.

Like a pinwheel firework, it went from wall to wall, from wall to ceiling, from ceiling to floor, from floor to wall□jumping on its two legs. Raincoat was jumping around on Suruga Kanbaru's practiced legs.

Or like a super ball fired at high speed.

A raucous dance of reflected angles.

Bounding, then bounding again.

My eyes couldn't keep up.

It was moving faster than my eyeballs.

It was accelerating like a body in free fall and going faster and faster, gradually, boldly picking up speed with every jump—the difference between rubber boots and sneakers a quaint detail, it gradually and boldly and unmistakably toyed with my vision.

Simply going from two to three dimensions had such a huge effect—the classroom had been turned into a sealed boundary by Oshino to limit the damage and to ensure a decisive outcome…and also out of a straightforward calculation that a narrow field offered advantages over a wide one in fighting the quick and agile Raincoat—but it was the complete opposite. That was totally backfiring.

Backfiring.

How could we not have foreseen it?

The reason Kanbaru had joined the basketball and not the track team—was that her legs shone most brightly as a weapon that made her faster than anyone else on the narrow field that is a basketball court! Despite her height and build Suruga Kanbaru had the jumping chops to dunk the ball with ease, and what did that mean in a constrained space with a low ceiling?!

It was backfiring, everything was.

I couldn't have miscalculated more flagrantly. What was I, stupid?

I never gave up a good chance to be wrong.

As Raincoat jumped around making a fool of me, my heels seemed nailed to the ground and I couldn't take a single step. In particular, the vertical movements from the floor to the ceiling, and from the ceiling to the floor, confounded me—it was a design issue in that the human eye

was physically capable of handling lateral movement but wasn't as prepared to shoot up and down. My vision couldn't keep up with Raincoat's movements.

Rapidly getting around behind me where I stood□

Raincoat jumped from the ceiling toward me at last. Spinning its body midair, heels over head like in a Sepak Takraw roll spike, it drove the tip of its foot into the crown of my head with the momentum it gained□I felt my skull collapse. As I lurched forward from the force of it, Raincoat, having already landed, met my jaw with a Muay Thai knee. The consecutive blows, the Sepak Takraw-Muay Thai combo, were nearly simultaneous timing-wise, and the impact of being sandwiched by a virtual pincer strike, something that exceeded pain, assaulted me. My brain felt dented along with my head, and I lost consciousness for a brief moment□suddenly comatose.

But I didn't die.

My wounds healed immediately.

Man, it was hell.

Sañjīva, the Buddhist hell of revival.

Crushed into dust, then mended and restored by a gust of wind, crushed again, mended again, crushed, repeatedly, into dust, crushed for eternity, one of the eight great hells□it was exactly like my spring break.

"Tsk…"

I extended my arm□and Raincoat evaded me. Then it cocked its fist, and I reacted□no, I didn't, my reflexes did. I'd focused on that left arm for so long that I was overly sensitive to its motion. What I ought to have taken more deeply to heart was Raincoat's earlier attack, consecutive kicks delivered *by choice* despite its left arm being free. Or

what the abrupt onset of its bewildering high-speed three-dimensional disruptive acceleratory movement, that terrifying footwork, meant. The significance of using not just the Rainy Devil left arm but all four of its limbs to maneuver.

Play with the devil and become the devil.

Forget whatever coming true, selling your soul, bodily possession, and all that□

Wish upon the devil and become the devil.

The left fist was a feint.

Only having mounted linear attacks at first□now Raincoat was finally employing footwork, combos, feints, that is to say, combat techniques.

No, not a feint.

A fake, was more like it. Because the tactic wouldn't have been accessible to Raincoat without Suruga Kanbaru's cooperation□

Bracing myself for the left fist fatally exposed my opposite flank, and the tip of Raincoat's toes connected, thrice this time, and in the same precise location□and as my body folded in a sideways V thanks to an attack that contradicted the theory of relativity and struck the same coordinates simultaneously three times in a row, the sole of Raincoat's other foot shot through my chest.

Like a catapult.

Overpowered, I fell over backward, but placing my hands on the floor as if to perform a back roll, I spun myself upright and put distance between myself and it□Raincoat immediately closed in.

The kick had struck one of my lungs.

It had probably collapsed.

It hurt to breathe.

Dammit, it wasn't healing right away—did it mean that Raincoat's kicks now had more power, more destructive potential than its left fist?

Did Kanbaru's thoughts surpass the devil?

Jealousy.

Hatred.

All her negative emotions.

Why not me, then.

"…*Because you just,*" I said—with my still collapsed lung, "*because you just won't do, Suruga Kanbaru*—!"

No one can ever replace someone else, and no one can ever be someone else. Senjogahara is Hitagi Senjogahara, and Kanbaru is Suruga Kanbaru.

And Koyomi Araragi is Koyomi Araragi.

The difference between me and Kanbaru.

Whether or not we knew Oshino.

Whether or not we stepped away.

Whether it was a demon or a monkey.

Random encounters, chance.

It did give rise to feelings of remorse.

I was remorseful, towards both Kanbaru and Senjogahara. But when it came to trading places if I could, I didn't feel that way—I had no desire to cede my position.

Right.

If I'm your hated rival in love—then you were mine, and I'd have done better to hate you, Kanbaru.

Maybe my remorse sprang from there too.

I hadn't considered Kanbaru my equal.

I'd condescended.

Made light of her.

Deigning to mediate between Kanbaru and Senjogahara to bring about their reconciliation, while I rested on an absolutely secure perch with consummate ease—how thoroughly repulsive a deed was that? Such a good, kind person. Such a bad, callous person.

If a wish.

If a wish is something you fulfill on your own, then—

Giving up on your own ought to be fine.

Giving up, provided you don't forget—ought to be fine.

"…! …! …!"

Relentless attack after attack splashed across my body, each impact so intense it actually remolded me—I wasn't able to dodge even one in four anymore. My body repaired and regenerated itself, destroyed part after destroyed part, but Raincoat's assault now outpaced the process.

Before I knew, I was trapped in a corner of the classroom. As if invisible strings were binding me, I couldn't move back or to either side. Raincoat no longer bothered with any footwork—if this were boxing, you'd say it was fighting on the inside, legs planted, and unopposed at that. No matter how nice the sneakers, the friction from the sustained, impractical acceleration would wear out the rubber soles, I'd vaguely hoped based on nothing, but even my optimistic projection was now bankrupt. Every permutation of fists, elbows, shins, toes, and heels tormented my body all over in quick succession. I wasn't even allowed a moment to scream out in pain, it was the ultimate combo chain.

It no longer fell under the rubric of strikes.

Pure pressure.

It wasn't just my bones breaking; the spots where I got hit were tearing, my skin and muscles were ripping and sundering. Raincoat's stance was that much more rooted and weighted forward than before and seemed to add to its left fist's destructive power by the moment.

Still□

Not to the extent of Suruga Kanbaru's legs...

"Uni…form."

My body may have been immortal, but my clothes weren't.

They'd been torn to shreds by that point.

Ugh. I'd ruined yet another one.

My high-collared jacket, when we were only a few days away from changing into our summer uniforms…

What excuse was I going to offer my sisters this time?

"Guh…kk."

At this distance…

At least, at this distance, if Raincoat offered me the slightest opportunity, I could render it immobile by hugging Kanbaru's body… and force it down to the ground with all I was worth and turn around the fight.

I still had a path to victory.

Even now, while I was trapped in a corner in positional terms, I wasn't actually cornered□attack me as Raincoat might, I had nothing to fear as long as my regenerative healing abilities were kicking in.

It was only painful.

Like Kanbaru's heart, it was only painful□

Being in pain meant I was alive.

"I hate you."

I heard a voice.

"I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you."

It was the voice□of Suruga Kanbaru.

From the deep pit under the raincoat's hood, as though appealing directly to my psyche, it resonated□and I heard:

"I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you."

"……"

Hatred□more hatred than any one person could bear.

Malice, hostility.

The negative emotions of a positive junior.

It seemed to swirl□to be brimming in Raincoat.

Its surface tension stretched to the limit.

"How dare you how dare you how dare you how dare you."

Along with the strikes, the voice continued.

The voice of hatred continued.

"I can't stand you I can't stand you I can't stand you I can't stand you I can't stand you I can't stand you I can't stand you I can't stand you□"

"…Kanbaru, sorry."

Out loud again.

I apologized to Kanbaru.

"Me, I haven't the least bit trouble standing you."

Rivals in love though we may be.

You and I might not match up at all□but, you know?

Can't we be friends at all?

"…■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■!"

Some sort of piercing shriek came from the deep pit□and Raincoat's kick penetrated my abdomen. Penetrated. It wasn't just that my organs ruptured, but rather, perfectly ignoring my joints and muscles, crushing my ribs and spine, it literally and non-figuratively penetrated clean through my belly so that the heel reached the wall behind me. I was skewered.

The damage□far outpaced my healing abilities.

It…

Zlrp, the leg pulled out.

It felt like my entire digestive tract was being tugged out.

The whole mess.

Dragged out□and my body was the deep pit now.

There was nothing inside the pit.

"Kanbaru□"

Uh oh.

With a large hole gouged in my abdomen□I couldn't stand straight, and twisting my body even a little threatened to jerk apart my upper and lower halves. Which meant that I couldn't make any more careless movements. I was still conscious, but one more blow in my state□would end it. It was me who'd gotten overwhelmed. How pathetic. At this rate, Kanbaru's second wish was going to come true. That was the one thing I had to avoid at all costs…

Or maybe it was an option?

It was only her second wish.

If Kanbaru could…hold out and not make a third wish□wasn't it fine? Her arm would go back to normal, and since a wish was a wish, she'd be by Senjogahara's side□because putting aside the manner, the wishes came true.

I wasn't ready to cede.

I wasn't ready to cede.

But I was ready to forgive.

I was supposed to have died during spring break, in the first place… so as Oshino said, it was nice and simple as far as solutions go.

Yes, I did feel attached to life.

But it wasn't like I was in trepidation over the thought of dying.

"Aa□ah, uh," I moaned.

For no reason I simply moaned.

They were like death throes.

I wouldn't be ruining my uniform again.

"Suruga, Kanbaru□"

That's when.

Raincoat's combos, which had gone on without a break for dozens of minutes already, ceased.

Abruptly they ceased.

It was□the opening I'd been waiting for.

But I couldn't carry out my plan to pin down Raincoat. There was of course the fact that the damage from the large hole opened in my abdomen seemed inestimably far from healing, and also the fact that my

consciousness, which I needed to execute the move, was already fading, but more than that—I, too, had frozen in place.

Probably for the same reason as Raincoat.

I found myself frozen.

"…You seem to be enjoying yourselves."

The door to the classroom opened.

The door that never would from the inside opened, from the outside.

Allowing someone to enter.

Hitagi Senjogahara, in her street clothes.

"Looks like you're having fun without me, Araragi. How unpleasant."

Her emotionless expression—her flat voice.

Confronted with this awful spectacle, she merely narrowed her eyes somewhat.

She always—appeared without warning.

Wearing a pair of jeans with no belt, a tank top in the same color, and a comfy largish hoodie, her hair tied loosely behind her, as if she'd stepped out of her room without changing, Hitagi Senjogahara stood there in her street clothes.

"S-Senjogahara…"

I couldn't speak well with the wind hole that had been opened in my abdomen—I had been left without a voice, and it was hard even to call out to her.

Why are you here?

I wanted to ask her.

But I already knew the answer without having to ask. Oshino had

called her here, of course—what other answer could there be? But how? He had no possible way to contact her—as if Hitagi Senjogahara would give her cell phone number to Mèmè Oshino, whom she disliked. There shouldn't have been any opportunity to do so, either.

A cell phone?

Oh, of course.

That asshole—not caring one bit about the sanctity of people's personal info, he'd gone and messed around with my phone in complete violation of my privacy. Yes, that cell phone in the backpack I'd given Oshino to hold on to before entering this classroom… It wasn't like I used a password to lock the thing, and no matter how bad Oshino was with gadgetry, given enough time he could surely find the contacts list or call history. Plus, Senjogahara would have given him a crash course on how to use a cell phone that time they met on Mother's Day—

But why?

For what purpose did Oshino summon Senjogahara here of all places, to this situation of all situations—

In a flash.

Raincoat leapt backwards, and via a few stops each on the ceiling and walls, moved from one corner of the classroom to the other, diagonally across and far away from me.

Why would it do that?

One more blow and the fight would have been over.

The wish granted.

Was her consciousness as Suruga Kanbaru temporarily suppressing the unconscious she'd provided to Raincoat? Was it thanks to Senjogahara's entry, and if so, had that been Oshino's aim? But how

would that serve as anything more than a temporary measure? The Rainy Devil fed off of a person's negative emotions, and until we got rid of them, nothing would change. This wasn't some old foreign movie, and the power of love wasn't going to solve everything. Why summon Senjogahara when you could come in yourself, Mèmè Oshino?!

As if she couldn't care less about Raincoat's antics, however, Senjogahara glared at me with cold eyes as I hovered near death's door. They were the eyes of a bird of prey zeroing in on a kill.

"So you lied to me, Araragi."

"…What?"

"You duped me saying you ran into a telephone pole and also kept this stuff about Kanbaru secret. Didn't we promise when we started dating? We said we wouldn't do that. About aberrations at least, we wouldn't keep any secrets from each other."

"Ah, well…"

That was true.

I hadn't forgotten or anything.

"You deserve to die a thousand times over." A chilling smile spread across Senjogahara's face.

An enormous mass of fear like I'd never felt even while Raincoat was beating me senseless shot through my body like a bolt of lightning. Scary… Damn, she was scary. What was she, Medusa? How did she muster such a gaze…against her boyfriend, no less? And wait, really? She was telling me this now, in this situation, with me in the state I was in? Way to read the room, Senjogahara!

"…But, Araragi, I guess you already did die a thousand times." With the door still flung open Senjogahara sprang off her back foot toward

the corner where I huddled. “I might let you off the hook this one time...”

Well.

A thousand times was probably an exaggeration.

Raincoat immediately reacted to Senjogahara’s advance—and likewise began dashing toward me. Out of nowhere, Hitagi Senjogahara and Suruga Kanbaru were having a foot race in lieu of the one they never did in middle school. In a straight line, Raincoat was about twice as far from me as Senjogahara, mathematically speaking, but the former track team star had a two-plus-year gap in her resume, while Raincoat was now drawing on Kanbaru’s leg strength—no, was the devil itself. The first one to get to my immobile form was, of course, Kanbaru.

Raincoat took the opportunity to wind up its left fist, ready to deliver me a final blow—but Senjogahara belatedly arrived to stand between it and me.

Watch out.

But I wasn’t even allowed the interval to think that.

A moment before impact—Raincoat was knocked away. Knocked away? Who could possibly do that, the way Raincoat was now? Not me, and Senjogahara even less. Then the sensible view was that, rather than being knocked away, Raincoat had leapt back of its own accord. Even if it did clumsily end up supine in the process.

I was dumbfounded.

That move—what was up with the unnatural move, as if Raincoat feared getting Senjogahara mixed into this, as if it eschewed hurting her above all?

Suruga Kanbaru’s conscious mind must have—no.

That would be far too convenient.

Aberrations are consistent.

They are rational to the bitter end.

It's just that the rationality doesn't always make sense to humans.

But in this case□

"Araragi. Knowing you, I bet you thought like an idiot that your death would solve everything," Senjogahara continued to speak to me□her back still turned to me, her eyes not on me, but also paying Raincoat no mind. My wretched condition, covered in blood and wounds□wasn't why she wouldn't look at me, of that I was certain. "Don't kid yourself. Your feeble self-sacrifice is totally uncalled for. If you died, how would I not do anything in my capacity to kill Kanbaru? I told you that once, didn't I? Are you trying to turn me into a murderer?"

…She'd seen through me.

Oh boy, what a devoted woman.

I couldn't even go and die cheerfully.

A wholehearted□twisted love.

"What infuriates me most of all is that you'd have thrown yourself into this even if your body weren't that way. If you were being so stupid just because you could ride your immortal body through it, then I might as well tell you to do as you please, but you went with the flow like there was no choice and end up looking like this□I don't know what to say."

"……"

"But coming from you, I guess I don't mind unsolicited favors and needless interventions and counterproductive meddling□"

Without gracing me with another glance to the very end,

Senjogahara took a steady step toward Raincoat's collapsed figure. Still on the floor, Raincoat began to crawl backwards as if it were terrified of her.

As if terrified…

As if terrified…why?

Come to think of it—faced with it now, it had been the same way last night. Raincoat had blasted me away then suddenly disappeared. That was because Senjogahara had shown up with the envelope I'd forgotten… But why should her entry usher Raincoat's retreat? It seemed so unnatural when you thought about it. A *human* street slasher or thrill killer might—but an *aberration* wouldn't care about witnesses. And anyway, Senjogahara couldn't have presented an obstacle for Raincoat given its mighty left arm.

So then why did it run?

Because the person who came on scene was Senjogahara?

What did that mean?

Was it really the power of love?

Did Suruga Kanbaru's feelings for Senjogahara outclass the devil, conveniently enough? Could earnest thought brush aside aberrations, the world itself, and open up a circuit to the heavens? No.

No.

That wasn't it… Right. The thought.

Even after Kanbaru had made her second wish to the Rainy Devil left hand, turning hers into a beast's—it still took four days for it to activate. That was because she just barely managed to suppress her hateful thoughts toward me. Her stance that you fulfilled wishes on your own suppressed the devil's violence. The stance that had grown firm

roots in her over the seven years since her first wish—Oshino had laughed and called it patently ridiculous, but not in the conventional sense.

She was by no means wrong—he'd said that, too.

Her thought.

Thoughts—Suruga Kanbaru's wish.

The Rainy Devil sees through us to find our darkest emotions—it sees and reads what's on the back. It sees the flip side of our wishes. You want to run faster because you hate your classmates. You desire to be by Senjogahara's side—because you hate Koyomi Araragi.

But that was just the flip side.

Just as the front has a back.

The back—has a front.

If the Rainy Devil hurt Hitagi Senjogahara—then whether or not it could kill the target of hatred, Koyomi Araragi, Kanbaru's *obverse wish* could no longer be granted… Right, it wasn't anything moving or sensitive like the power of love but a more sober and primitive matter.

A contract.

A deal.

The Rainy Devil could only grant the flip side of wishes, but that didn't mean it could neglect the top side. In fact, even when Kanbaru was in grade school—it granted her flipside wish of getting revenge on her classmates, but in the end, her topside wish of wanting to become faster came true as well. It properly came true apart from that whole causality. What was patently ridiculous was that this was exactly what the Rainy Devil intended—it simply interpreted the front as the back, but didn't pull the latter out of thin air. The reverse couldn't exist without

the obverse. No, going again by what Oshino said, left hands didn't have intentions. It was all Suruga Kanbaru's unconscious mind—it established the causality between an obverse and a reverse side that never intersected, as a contradiction.

A contract with the devil.

In exchange for your soul.

A cooling-off period.

Wishing an impossibility.

A double bind—between a rock and a hard place.

Between the obverse and reverse.

That was why—precisely why the Rainy Devil couldn't raise its hand against Senjogahara. That was the contract, that was the deal. As long as Senjogahara shielded me—it couldn't raise a hand even against me, the hated, hated me.

It couldn't raise that left hand against us.

If one method was for me to overwhelm the devil and make it impossible for the flipside wish to be fulfilled—then there was also another, which was to make it impossible for the topside wish to be fulfilled.

And now, Senjogahara even pledged in front of the devil that she'd kill Kanbaru if I died. Claiming ignorance was not an option. The Rainy Devil's situation was already locked down.

Always acting like he saw through everything…

Like he saw through everything more than any devil.

Oshino, you… Your badness and callousness make me pale in comparison—!

"It's been a while, Kanbaru. I'm glad you seem to be doing well,"

Senjogahara said.

Then, she went over to Raincoat, who tried to slide away on its back—no, to her old acquaintance Suruga Kanbaru—and slowly covered her body with her own, pinning her down.

Even after getting in a wretched state—

I hadn't been able to.

But finally she did what I could never do.

Taking that beastly left arm.

And the human right arm, and holding them, soothingly.

Senjogahara's stapler—

Was no longer on her.

"…My senior Senjogahara."

A mutter from beneath the hood.

The voice resonating, pleading.

What lurked under the hood was no deep pit. What lurked there was no face on the verge of crying. Not on the verge—it was crying. Reflected clearly in my eyes was the teary-eyed, crying, and cry-laughing face of a girl.

I—wracked with sobs, she voiced her thought.

"I love you."

She voiced her wish.

"Oh. Me, not so much." Direct, unfiltered, in the same tone as ever. Senjogahara said flatly, "Will you stay by my side anyway?"

Sorry I made you wait so long, she said, most flatly.

…What a fool.

The height of folly!

Jeez—I'd be lucky to call myself a tomato can here.

A master class on how to play the comic relief, if I do say so myself, and I'm pretty used to it. My uselessness was almost exemplary.

A good girl who can say sorry.

I thought I knew very well how greedy a woman Hitagi Senjogahara was. I thought I knew very well how bad at giving up she was.

If it really mattered to her.

Senjogahara would never give it up.

Unsolicited favors, needless interventions.

Counterproductive meddling.

Even so…I don't know, all of these people around me are really warped—

They have two sides to them.

And the obverse and reverse are one and the same, like in a Möbius strip.

Well, I guess the power of love is one interpretation, then.

It's pretty depressing to be forgotten by someone, after all.

Thinking such thoughts, waiting for the large hole in my stomach to close up, I just decided to watch, without wisecracking, the Sapphic spectacle unfolding before my eyes. If I were Oshino, I would have put on nihilistic airs as though they suited me, perhaps stuck an unlit cigarette in my mouth, and asked the two of them if something good had happened to them, but unfortunately, I was a minor.

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next day, I was roused awake as usual by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi, and rubbing my drowsy eyes, I prepared to head to Senjogahara's house for an all-day Sunday study session as I'd promised, in high spirits, holding out hope that perhaps this was the day I finally got to eat her home cooking, but just as I straddled my commuter bicycle, the only one left in my possession, and opened the gate and left my home, I encountered a bored-looking girl who was stretching in front of a telephone pole for whatever reason. She was in casual clothes, but the combination of the short pleated skirt and the bike shorts peeking out past them made her look mostly the same as she did in her school uniform□it was the star of Naoetsu High, my junior Suruga Kanbaru.

"Good morning, my senior Araragi."

"…Good morning, Miss Kanbaru."

"Hm? Oh, I don't deserve such a formal greeting. Starting with everyday good manners, you're pure quality. Have your injuries healed?"

"Yeah… If anything, the sun is the tough part for me now, but it's not as bad as I thought. That and my healing damage are about even. So, Kanbaru, how do you know where I live?"

"Aw, acting like you have no idea. Are you setting up the scene for me? I used to stalk you. Of course I'd have ferreted out your home address."

"……"

Her cheerful laughter did nothing to dispel my bewilderment.

"And is there something you need?" I asked her.

"Yes. I received a call from her this morning, and she told me to come get you. Oh, let me carry your bag." Almost as soon as Kanbaru said this, she plucked my backpack out from my bicycle's front basket and held it in her left hand. She looked at me with a beaming, innocent smile. "I oiled up your bike chain, too. And if there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to ask."

She'd gone past being friends with Senjogahara and was her gofer.

While I had no interest in having the star of the school at my beck and call, if the pathologically jealous Senjogahara had assigned such a task to Kanbaru, then was their relationship mended, and was the Valhalla Duo back together again, or was I reading too much into it? I probably was reading too much into it.

"How about a massage before we leave? You say you're fine, but you must be tired. I'm pretty good, I'd have you know."

"…But what about your team? You have practice on Sundays, too, don't you? With the exam break looming, you need to hustle."

"No, I can't play basketball anymore."

"Huh?"

"It might seem premature, but I'm retiring."

Still holding my backpack, Kanbaru showed me her left hand. That left arm of hers was wrapped tight in a long white bandage up to her elbow. You could tell nonetheless that there was something slightly off about its length and shape.

"It was all so half-baked. The devil left, but in the end my arm

didn’t go back to normal. There’s no way I could keep playing basketball. Still, it’s powerful, in its own way, and actually feels quite handy.”

“…Give me my bag back. Now.”

What could I say.

If only by half, her wish had been granted.

Then that much was only fair, it seemed.

Nadeko Sengoku was my sister's classmate. I have two little sisters, and Nadeko Sengoku was friends with the younger one. Unlike the current pathetic state of my personal relationships, I was a fairly normal kid in elementary school as far as how many friends I had, but even back then I suppose you could say that while I enjoyed playing with everyone, I never enjoyed playing with specific someones. So I might have had fun with my classmates during recess, but I rarely did anything with them after school. What an unpleasant kid. Unpleasant to talk about, unpleasant to think about. In fact, I would prefer to not do either. Still, you can't teach an old dog new tricks, or maybe the other way around, but either way I'm trying to say that I've always been like that. Which is why I'd always go home right after school, even though I didn't take any lessons, and I'd sometimes find Nadeko Sengoku at play when I got there. My two sisters are now attached to each other, side by side no matter when, where, what, or why to the point that I am more creeped out than worried, but back in elementary school they tended to act on their own. The older one was the total outdoorsy type, while the younger mostly stayed indoors, and about once every three days she would bring a friend from school over to our home. Nadeko Sengoku wasn't particularly good friends with my youngest sister, but more like one of her many friends, I imagined. I qualify that statement with a somewhat uncertain "I imagined" at the end because I don't remember that time in my life very well to be honest, but when I try, of the friends my little sister used to bring home, I at least do remember Nadeko

Sengoku. That's because, coming home without having played with my friends, I ended up having to play with my little sister (My two sisters and I shared a room back then. My parents only assigned me my own room once I started middle school), mostly to liven things up by filling an open spot in a board game or the like, but I'd be called over with ridiculous frequency if Nadeko Sengoku was the one my little sister was playing with. In other words, my little sister had lots of friends (This can still be said about both of my little sisters, but they're both incredibly talented when it comes to standing in the center of attention. I couldn't be any more jealous, as their older brother), but out of all the classmates she brought home, Nadeko Sengoku was the rare girl who liked to do things on her own. To be frank, all of my little sister's friends seemed the same to me, but I would of course remember the name of the girl who was always on her own, at least.

Her name was about it, though.

Yeah, I didn't remember much, after all.

And so I'm going to have to apologize for appending yet another uncertain qualification, but Nadeko Sengoku was a reserved girl of few words who constantly looked down at the floor—I thought. That's what I thought, but, well, I don't know. Maybe I'm describing another one of my little sister's friends, or maybe one of my own friends at the time. When I was in grade school, actually, I always found it annoying and irritating when my little sister had friends over. Add to that the fact I was forced to play with them, and of course I'd be left with a poor impression. When I look back at it, it must have been more annoying for those girls to have to play with their friend's older brother, but in any case, that was in the past, so please understand a grade schooler's

sensibility. Once I started middle school, my youngest sister invited friends over less often, and even when she did, stopped inviting me to play with them. There was the fact that our rooms were now separated, but there must have been some other, bigger reason. That's how things are. Most of her personal relationships must have been wiped clean when she graduated because both of my little sisters ended up going to a private middle school. Nadeko Sengoku was my sister's classmate in grade school, but not now, because they went to different schools. So it's more than two years ago that I last saw her according to the most favorable estimate, and in truth it's probably more than six.

Six years.

More than enough time for a person to change.

At least, I thought of myself as having utterly changed. Even when I say I was always like that, back then and now just aren't the same. Taking a look at my elementary graduation photo album or the like now is just too painful. I know I just said something about a "grade schooler's sensibility," but comparing my high school self to myself in those days, I wouldn't dare argue that I am now better or superior. We tend to look at the past through rose-colored glasses, yes, but what's cringe-worthy here perhaps isn't my grade school self, but the person I am now as seen by the grade school me. No, embarrassingly enough, even if he and I ran into each other in the street, we wouldn't recognize the person standing in front of us as ourselves.

I don't know if that's a bad thing or not.

Not being able to boast of my current self to my past self.

But sometimes it's like that.

Maybe we're all like that.

Which is why when I met Nadeko Sengoku again, I didn't realize it was her at first—it took some time for me to remember. If only I'd noticed immediately, or even a little faster—if I'd noticed that she was entwined with a snake, perhaps this story wouldn't have ended the way it did. A poignant thought, but it's not as if my regrets mean anything either to her or to the aberration. To start this story off with its conclusion, it seems as though Nadeko Sengoku, a friend of my little sister's whom I barely remembered, ended up a unique someone that I could never forget.

“I’m sorry I made you wait, my senior Araragi.”

June eleventh, a Sunday.

I’m not sure if “jockish” is the best way to put it, but at 10:55 a.m., exactly five minutes before we’d agreed to meet in front of the main gate of our school, Naoetsu High, Suruga Kanbaru, the former star of the basketball team and one year my junior, came dashing, and unable to stop, jumped, sailed easily past my head, landed, turned, and spoke those words with a fresh smile on her face and her right hand in front of her chest… I realized that I wasn’t particularly tall for a high school student, but I’d never considered my height a non-issue that a girl shorter than me could clear with a scissors jump. It seemed like I had some reconsidering to do.

“No, I just got here myself. I haven’t been waiting.”

“Wow… Being so transparently considerate just to avoid causing me undue mental stress testifies to your good nature. You’re just born magnanimous. The likes of me can only take three steps back and look up to take in all that you are. I’m truly stunned that you’d move me with your largeness within a mere few seconds of seeing you. Seems like I have no choice but to spend all the respect I can muster in my lifetime on you alone. Good heavens, I think I nearly resent you for that.”

“……”

She was the same as ever.

And hey, don’t go around calling people transparent.

The best response to casual kindness is to feign ignorance, okay?

“No, I really did just get here,” I assured her. “And in any case, you came early, too. There’s no reason for you to apologize.”

“I won’t have any of that. No matter what you say, the fact that I wasn’t here before my senior is cause enough for an apology. I think it’s an unforgivable sin to waste the time of someone above you.”

“I’m not above you.”

“You’re a year ahead of me so you are.”

“True, but…”

That was just a matter of age.

Or how tall we were, I guess (physically speaking, I was above her).

Not that she couldn’t easily leap over me, though.

Suruga Kanbaru□a second-year at Naoetsu High.

She was our ace basketball player until just a month earlier, and her name was known across the whole school as its biggest celebrity and star. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, it was her who had led our private prep school’s weak little sports organization to the national tournament the same year she joined it. She was a frightening junior, and a half-assed washout third-year like me would normally be unable to so much as speak to her, or even step in her shadow for that matter. Just the other day, she gave her position of team captain to one of her juniors because of an injury to her left arm, then quit the basketball team early□and it was still fresh in my mind the way the whole school was shaken by the impact of the news. I doubted the memory would ever go stale.

Kanbaru’s left arm.

It was still wrapped tight in a long white bandage.

“Yes,” Kanbaru began to say in a quiet voice, “as you can see, I’ve retired. The only thing I was ever good at was basketball, and now I have nothing to offer the school. So you ought to deal with me accordingly.”

“What do you mean, ‘deal with’ you? For all the confidence you seem to have, your self-esteem can be weirdly low. What you’ve done for the basketball team won’t go away just because you’re retiring early.”

Guilt over her early retirement wasn’t exactly it, but then again, it seemed unreasonable to expect her to stay the exact same after *all that happened* to her. Personally, though, I did wish that Kanbaru wouldn’t be so self-deprecating.

“Thanks,” she told me. “I couldn’t appreciate your concern more. I’ll gladly take those feelings into consideration.”

“Take the words into consideration, too. Okay, why don’t we get going.”

“Yup,” she said before scurrying over to my side and taking my open left hand into her right in what could only be described as a natural motion. She didn’t “hold my hand” as much as wrap her fingers around mine. From there, she pushed her body into my arm, sticking to me like she was about to embrace me. Her chest was right around my elbow because of our height difference, and the delicate, nerve-dense area of my body was beset by a sensation like mashed potatoes.

“No,” corrected Kanbaru, “I think the usual comparison is to marshmallows.”

“Wait, what?! Did I voice that stupid monologue out loud just now?!”

“Ah, no, you didn’t, you didn’t. Don’t worry, I only heard it telepathically.”

“That’d make it an even bigger problem! Everyone around here must have heard it, then!”

“Heheheh. Well, we’ll just have to show them, in that case. It’s not like I’m someone who worries about appearing scandalous anymore.”

“Stop smiling and saying what a girlfriend might say when you’re just my junior! You know it’s not you I’m dating, it’s your senior who you respect very much!”

Hitagi Senjogahara.

My classmate.

And girlfriend.

And the senior that Suruga Kanbaru admired.

She, Senjogahara, was what had connected the school’s biggest celebrity and star to the ever-nondescript average student that I am. Kanbaru and Senjogahara had been junior and senior since middle school, and while this, that, and the other happened between then and now, the two were still friends as the Valhalla Duo. For a time, Suruga Kanbaru stalked me because I was the person who was dating her admired senior.

I told her, “It’s not like you ever worried about scandals to begin with. Now get off of me.”

“No. I read that you’re supposed to hold hands when you’re on a date.”

“A date?! When did I ever call this a date?”

“Hrm?” Kanbaru tilted her head as if that were the last thing she expected to hear. “Now that you mention it, maybe you never did. I was so excited when you asked me to go somewhere with you that I didn’t really listen to what you were saying.”

“Oh…I guess you were mumbling your replies the whole time…”

“Still, I don’t know about that. I’m on the open side when it comes to sex, and I do want to follow your wishes wherever possible, but you’d proceed to the deed without even going on a date first? I worry about your future.”

“We’re not proceeding to any deed so stop worrying about me! And a high school second-year shouldn’t be talking about how open she is about sex!!”

“Then again, we’ve already come this far. This pleasure cruise has already set sail.”

“So you are enjoying it after all!”

I caught a look of how Kanbaru was dressed.

Jeans and a T-shirt, with a long-sleeved shirt on top. Expensive-looking sneakers. On her head was a baseball cap, probably in part because the sun was getting stronger. It suited a sporty girl like her perfectly, but we’ll put that aside for now.

“You’re technically wearing long sleeves and long pants like I told you…”

But.

Her jeans were stylishly ripped here and there, while her T-shirt was short enough to show off plenty of her curved waist. It almost seemed a little much… Of course, people were free to dress as they wanted on Sundays, but still…

"…You really weren't listening to a word I said, were you?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're about to go up into the mountains."

"The mountains? So we're performing the deed in the mountains?"

"There'll be no deed."

"Hm, pretty wild. I think I like it. That's quite manly of you. I'm into being treated rough now and then."

"I said no deed! Listen to me!"

I was certain I'd told her to wear long sleeves and long pants to protect herself from bugs, snakes, and the like in the mountains, yet she'd showed up in clothes with plenty of openings… It didn't seem like they'd do her much good…

"Fine," she said. "Wherever you go, I'm willing to come along with you. Even if you try to tell me not to. Neither rain nor snow nor heat nor overcast skies will stop me."

"Overcast skies don't sound like much of a deterrent…"

In fact, I could have used some clouds with all the sun we were getting.

But even the day before, when I called Kanbaru's home, she wouldn't listen to a word I was saying and made the same kind of distracted replies ("You don't even need to tell me where we're going. The needle of my compass is always pointing in whatever direction you're headed," and so on)… It was actually impressive in a way how prone to making assumptions she was. She went about it in a different way than Hanekawa, like she had tunnel vision and could only see straight ahead.

"In any case, this isn't a date," I clarified.

“Oh, so it’s not… I was so sure that it was. I’d gotten myself fired up for it.”

“Fired up?”

“Yup. I mean, this is my first-ever heterosexual date.”

I decided not to comment on the “heterosexual” part.

I wasn’t confident I could make a good quip about it.

“I was so fired up,” she continued, “that I broke my solemn vow to myself and bought a cell phone just for today, the first one I’ve ever owned in my seventeen years alive.”

“……”

…Please let’s keep this light!

“It’d be awful if I somehow got separated from you and couldn’t get in contact,” she explained. “We live in an age where pay phones have all but disappeared, so a cell phone is an essential dating tool.”

“W-Well…you’re right. Heh, heheh. But there still are a good number of pay phones left out here in the countryside…”

“That’s not all. I woke up at four to make us lunches. One for me and one for you. Since we were going to meet at eleven, I assumed I’d get to eat lunch with you.”

As she said this, Kanbaru presented me with a bundle her bandaged left arm held… Yes, I’d noticed from the beginning, but judging by its tall rectangular shape, it was one of those multiple-box affairs…

Could we keep this light, please?

I mean, literally now…

I certainly knew we’d be together for lunch, so my plan had been to take her out to a fast food place once we were done, like a good senior. But it seemed that this junior of mine operated on a more deadly plane.

So that was her move. Homemade lunches…

It was a surprise attack.

“I was so happy and excited about getting to go on a date with my revered senior that I could barely get any sleep and also woke up early, so it was a nice diversion.”

“A diversion, huh? Is all of that for lunch, though? It’s a lot of food… I should let you know up front that I can’t eat that much.”

“I made it for us to split half and half, but I can just eat whatever you don’t finish. I hate wasting food, so I did take that into account.”

“Okay…”

I took a look at Kanbaru’s fully exposed navel.

Maybe around ten percent body fat, at the most?

She basically had an hourglass figure.

Fit Sugaru’s hourglass figure.

It almost seemed like a palindrome…

It wasn’t, though.

“Hold on, Kanbaru. Are you one of those people who don’t get fat no matter how much you eat?”

“Uhm, it’s more like I’m one of those people who lose tons of weight unless they eat like crazy.”

“People like that exist?!” That would make girls envious of her… In fact, even as a boy I was envious of her! “How exactly do you get your body to do that?”

“Simple. First, start off with two sets of ten-mile sprints every morning.”

“Okay, never mind.”

So that was it.

What she considered a normal amount of exercise was on a different level.

It seemed that Suruga Kanbaru was still making sure to work out every day, even after her retirement from the basketball team. Impressive. It made perfect sense, though. She might have claimed she quit because of an injury to her left arm, but the truth lay elsewhere.

“Ah…” she let out an exaggerated sigh. “But it looks like it was all a waste… So it wasn’t a date after all. I was really looking forward to it, too. I feel like an idiot, the way I went off and got myself excited for nothing. I’m red with embarrassment. My dreams were too big for reality. It seems so obvious that a noble senior such as yourself would never bother dating a fool like me. I couldn’t have been any more conceited… I’m sorry to have troubled you with my wild assumptions. Well, this cell phone and these lunch boxes are pointless now. They’re just going to weigh us down, so I’ll toss them somewhere. Wait here just a minute, I’ll change into a tracksuit real fast.”

“Actually, this is a date!”

I lost.

Such a weak man…

“Today was a date after all, Kanbaru! Yeah, I just remembered I was, um, really looking forward to today, too! Hooray, I finally get to go on a date with Miss Kanbaru! Okay? So hold onto your phone and those lunches! You don’t need to change your clothes, either!”

“Really?” Kanbaru’s expression started to glow.

Uh oh. She looked super cute.

“I’m glad. You’re very kind,” she said.

“Yeah…though I have the feeling my kindness is going to be my

downfall one of these days…”

……

I was going on a date with Kanbaru, Senjogahara’s junior, before I ever went on a date with Senjogahara herself, my girlfriend. I doubted she’d count this as cheating, given how unusually lenient that tsundere girl was with Kanbaru, but it was still undeniable proof of how weak-willed I was…

Also, we were still holding hands the entire time we were having this conversation, our fingers still entwined. I made a sly effort to disentangle them, but we were locked tight as if our hands were in a rugby scrum. It felt like my hand was a piece in a wire puzzle or the victim of a submission hold.

Like a snake had wrapped itself around it.

“Still, Kanbaru. Button up that shirt you’re wearing on top. You have to agree that baring your navel is a bad idea when we’re going into the mountains. As far as those distressed jeans□well, I guess you’ll be fine with those as long as you’re careful.”

“Hmm. Okay, as you wish.”

Kanbaru followed my instructions and buttoned up her long-sleeved shirt, hiding her curved waist from sight. I had to admit that a small part of me regretted it, but I knew I shouldn’t be having such wicked thoughts about my girlfriend’s junior.

“Now let’s get going,” I said.

“Oh, now that you mention it. Are you going to be walking today?”

“Yeah. We’re heading to a mountain. I don’t know where I’d be able to park a bike, plus I can’t afford to have my only bike stolen.” The mountain bike I’d used for trips had been smashed to smithereens, after

all, thanks to a certain someone's left arm. Not that I'd say that to her since it could only come out sarcastic. "It's not like this is much of a trip. Look, you can even see where we're going from here. That mountain over there…"

As I said this, I suddenly remembered something. When I'd first started to speak to Kanbaru a month ago, she was so averse to touching the body of the boy dating her idol Senjogahara that she declined to ride on the back of my bicycle, opting against all common sense to run alongside me as I pedaled… And now that same girl was holding my hand, wrapping her fingers around mine, and shoving her chest into my body…

"Heheheh." Kanbaru wore an innocent and bashful grin and nearly skipped down the street. "My senior, Araragi, my senior, Araragi, my senior, Araragi, my senior, Araragi～～～"

"……"

Well, hasn't she grown attached!

She's even humming to herself!

"By the way, Kanbaru… I've always meant to tell you this, but could you stop calling me your senior?"

"Huh?" She seemed puzzled, like she hadn't expected to hear that. "Why? I call you my senior because you are my senior. I couldn't imagine calling my senior anything but my senior."

"Well, there's a lot of other things you could call me."

"Like 'my senior, Kesennuma'?"

"Don't change my name."

No, the other part.

Plus "Kesennuma" was a place name.

“I’m talking about the ‘my senior’ part. It’s so stiff and formal.”

“Please don’t say that. Stiff and formal is exactly what I want to be.”

“O…kay. Well, sure, I suppose I am your senior, but it just sounds too serious. And ‘my senior, Araragi’ is a mouthful like my full name.”

My full name is Koyomi Araragi.

Seven syllables.

The same as “my senior, Araragi.”

“Hmm. Should I call you ‘Mister Araragi’ in that case?”

“I guess that’s one solution? But I’m only a year older, so I don’t think there’s any need for you to be so proper and uptight with me. And I feel kind of weird about being called ‘Mister’ in the first place. There’s a grade school kid I know who always calls me that, but in her case, she speaks in this weirdly polite manner.”

Her personality couldn’t be any worse, though.

That reminded me. I hadn’t seen Hachikuji lately.

……

That made me feel kind of lonely.

“Kanbaru, I know a lot happened between us over Senjogahara, but I’d like us to treat each other more like equals.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Then again, I’m not sure I’m on even ground with our school’s biggest star.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Nothing could ever make me happier than being with you like this. Getting to know you makes me nearly as happy as reconciling with my other esteemed senior Senjogahara. If there’s

anything about you that I'm dissatisfied about, it's that I didn't meet you sooner in life."

"…Uh huh."

She really did have low self-esteem.

I could understand why, though, considering what I'd learned a month ago.

She had a lot going on, too.

"So," she confirmed with me, "I'm getting the sense that it would be okay for me to refer to you in a more intimate way than 'my senior'?"

"Yeah. You can call me whatever you want."

"All right, Koyomi."

"……"

……

Only my family calls me that!

"And Koyomi, you can call me Suruga."

"You're going on again like we're an item! And why do these milestone events keep on happening between me and my girlfriend's junior?! Even Senjogahara still calls me 'Araragi'! Do you have any idea how much of a leap you just made?!"

"Please don't get so worked up. You know that was supposed to be a joke, Koyomi."

"Why are you still calling me that then, Suruga?!"

"The 'Dashing Knight of Lightning' Koyomi."

"And now you're sticking some weird slogan on my name? My grandfather gave me my name, stop messing around with it! There's nothing dashing or lightning-like about me, and I'm not a knight, either! And that's like, twice as long as my full name, anyway! You're losing

sight of our initial goal here!”

“The ‘Last Hero of Our Century’ Koyomi.”

“The last one this century?! Isn’t that a little premature?!”

“Well, in any case, I can’t bring myself to address my senior casually. So ‘Koyomi’ is out. I don’t feel comfortable not using a title. But if a slogan is too much, can we try a nickname?”

“A nickname…” Her sensibility could be a little off the mark…or more like off target. I couldn’t imagine her giving me a proper nickname, but then again, you never know. “Fine, then try coming up with something,” I told her.

“Yup.” Kanbaru closed her eyes for a bit as if she were deliberating. A few seconds later, her head popped up. “I thought of one,” she said.

“Wow, that was fast. Hit me with it.”

“Ragi.”

“That’s a lot cooler than I thought it’d be! Too cool, in fact!”

Like she was purposely using a nickname that was too cool for me just to make fun of me… It sounded too edgy to be the nickname of a Japanese high school kid…

“I took the bottom half of ‘Araragi’ to come up with it.”

“So I gathered… But shouldn’t nicknames be a little softer and more charming?”

“You have a point. In that case, we can take a bit from ‘Araragi’ and a bit from ‘Koyomi’ to get…”

“To get?”

“Ragiko.”

“Now you’re obviously making fun of me!”

“Don’t be shy, li’l Ragiko.”

“Go home! I don’t need you after all!”

“Ragiko is being mean to me… But I actually don’t mind, heheheh…”

“Agh! I forgot, yelling doesn’t work on a masochist! Are you the strongest opponent I’ve faced yet?!”

I was having fun talking to her.

Maybe a little too much fun.

I was nearly losing sight of what we were setting out to do.

“I know it’s probably inappropriate to say this, but…Kanbaru. Not to seize on what you said earlier, but if I’d met you before I started going out with Senjogahara, I wonder if we’d be going out instead…”

“Yes. I was actually thinking the same thing. What if I’d met you before becoming drawn to her. It’s so rare for me to feel this way about someone of the opposite sex.”

I sighed.

Of course, I wouldn’t have come to know Kanbaru if it wasn’t for Senjogahara, and the same went for Kanbaru, making this hypothetical no more than that.

“What do you say,” she offered, “to the two of us killing and burying that nuisance of a woman?”

“You’re scaring me!”

We’ve talked enough, but I still can’t pin down your character! I can’t fathom your depths! Just how much is there to you, Suruga Kanbaru?!

“I know that you respect Senjogahara as your senior, but…you’re surprisingly wicked.”

“Don’t shower me with praise. You’ll make me blush.”

“That wasn’t praise.”

“I’m happy to be called anything by you.”

“I can’t believe you, you little masochist…”

“Ooh, little masochist. I like that. Keep going.”

“……”

While I’d harbored fears that Kanbaru might find herself lost after coming into contact with the true nature of her middle school idol Senjogahara, it seemed that thanks to such a proclivity I didn’t need to worry.

In any case, about Suruga Kanbaru.

She was actually a sapphist.

As you could probably tell from our conversation up to this point, she not only worshiped Hitagi Senjogahara as a senior but also loved her from the bottom of her heart. You could even say that yes, Kanbaru and I were rivals in love□and yet we were walking arm in arm. It was hard to say what was going on. Then again, it was probably that she felt indebted to me for what happened at the end of last month, or maybe that she felt grateful, or something along those lines…

It didn’t feel bad having one of my juniors get attached to me, but it didn’t feel great that the attraction was due to a misunderstanding.

To borrow a phrase from Oshino□just like with Senjogahara.

Kanbaru simply had gone and saved herself all on her own□

“……”

But yes, I couldn’t deny it.

Indebtedness or misunderstanding or whatever, it seemed like I needed to do at least something to adjust Kanbaru’s overblown image of

me. Or maybe to destroy my image… If her impression of me stayed too positive, she'd be that much more disappointed when everything went south.

Which is why I hatched Operation Ruin Koyomi Araragi's Image.

Part One.

A man who was loose with money.

"Kanbaru, I forgot my wallet. Think you could lend me some cash? I promise to give it back right away."

"Okay, sure. Is thirty thousand yen enough?"

She was rich!

Hmm…someone who was loose with other people's time…wouldn't be very convincing after I'd arrived before her at our meeting spot today…

Operation Ruin Koyomi Araragi's Image, Part Two.

A hopeless lecher.

"Kanbaru, you know what I'm interested in right now? Girls' underwear."

"Oh, what a coincidence. Me too. I consider women's underwear works of fine art. I never thought we'd agree on this point."

She agreed!

Right, I could never hope to match Kanbaru when it came to smuttiness… Wait, no! Regular lechery might be out, but maybe I stood a chance if I went in some strange direction…

"I'm particularly interested," I proclaimed, "in elementary schoolgirls' underwear!"

"I couldn't agree more! Wow, I always knew you weren't the type to be constrained by what society thinks. You know how to live!"

“My stock rose?!”

Why?

Hmm. Okay, then it was time for Operation Ruin Koyomi Araragi’s Image, Part Three (I was having too much fun with this and already losing sight of my original goal).

A megalomaniac who goes on and on about his dreams.

“Kanbaru, you’re talking to a man who’s gonna be big one day!”

“You don’t need to be telling me that. In fact, I think you’re already huge. I don’t know if there’ll be any space left by your side if you get any bigger.”

“Nkk…!”

No, this much was to be expected!

I needed to keep going!

“I’m gonna become a musician!”

“Oh? Then I think I’ll become your instrument.”

“I don’t even know what that means, but what a cool line!”

Her stock had gone up in my ledger.

Man, why?

“What’s all this about?” Kanbaru asked me. “You don’t need to tell me these things because I couldn’t possibly love and respect you more than I already do.”

“Yeah, it’s useless…” Just as she was happy whatever I told her, she was going to worship me no matter what kind of person I was. “I don’t get it, though. Why do you overrate me that much?”

“Listen to you.” Kanbaru laughed. “Until just now, I’d always thought that there was no such thing as a stupid question, but I stand corrected.”

“……”

It sounded like a cool line to me for a brief moment, but then I thought about it and realized that someone here was just an idiot.

“I vowed to devote this life of mine to you,” she added. “Not because you helped mediate between me and her, but because I think you’re worthy of that kind of vow.”

“A vow, you say…”

“Yes. I thought I’d make my vow to the sun, which never stops shining upon us and bestowing its gifts, but the thought came to me at night, so I chose the closest street lamp instead.”

“That’s the most arbitrary thing I’ve ever heard of!”

“But street lamps shine upon us and bestow their gifts, too, don’t they? Life would be pretty tough without them.”

“True, but…”

Vow to the moon, at least.

Maybe it had been cloudy.

“But perhaps,” Kanbaru conceded, “I, myself, am not worthy of vowing to spend my life preying upon your good graces.”

“I don’t know where to begin with you, but that spelling mistake…”

Urkk.

Operation Ruin Koyomi Araragi’s Image was at an impasse!

“…Hmph.”

Koyomi Araragi.

Suruga Kanbaru.

Come to think of it, there’s one thing other than Senjogahara that we have in common.

Neither of us is *human.*

Well, actually, both of us are mostly human. Only□

Koyomi Araragi's *blood.*

Suruga Kanbaru's *left arm.*

Each is something other than human.

No small part of my blood is a *demon's*□and Kanbaru's left arm is altogether that of a *monkey.* Just as I grew out my hair to hide the fang marks left on my neck by a vampire, Kanbaru hid her monkey's left arm by wrapping it in a long bandage. That's the real reason the once bright and shining star was forced to retire from the team early. What else could she do? There's no playing basketball with a monkey's arm.

Both Kanbaru and I had gotten ourselves involved with aberrations.

…And speaking of aberrations, Hitagi Senjogahara, my girlfriend and Kanbaru's senior, had also encountered one.

For me, a demon.

For Kanbaru, a monkey.

For Senjogahara, it was a crab.

But Kanbaru and I were different from her in a decisive way□Senjogahara faced her aberration every day for over two years but finally exorcised it and *became human again.* Kanbaru and I got rid of our aberrations□but parts of our bodies were *still not human.* You could say that we were like aberrations ourselves□we'd gotten involved with them and become them.

It was□

A sad thing to have in common.

"Hm? What's the matter?" she asked me.

“Oh… Er, nothing.”

“You’re going to spoil this date with that gloomy expression of yours.”

“Date… Fine, whatever.”

“By the way, I meant to ask you earlier, but what are we going to do once we get to this mountain? Is there anything to do up there, other than our deed?”

“If you’re being serious right now, please stay far away from any Wandervogel clubs… But I take it you haven’t been to the mountains very much?”

“My team did do some runs through the mountains as part of our training back in middle school, kind of like mock cross-country races. We ended up having to cancel them after some students started getting sprains, though.”

“Hunh.”

So to her, even the mountains were just a spot to work out.

Then again, it wasn’t her technique per se that had made her our basketball ace, but rather that overwhelming leg strength of hers that easily hopped over my height.

“Does that mean you’re at home in the mountains?” she asked me.

“No, not particularly…”

“But don’t boys scrounge around for rhinoceros and stag beetles when they’re little?”

“Stag beetles…”

“Yes. So precious they’re like black mold.”

“That doesn’t sound too valuable…”

But why would I look in the mountains for them?

That was called illegal dumping.

“I suppose it’s not exactly the kind of place to go on a date—especially considering the season,” I admitted. “I’m pretty sure I gave you a full explanation yesterday, but you know, it’s a job from Oshino.”

“Oshino? Oh, Mister Oshino.”

Kanbaru’s expression turned ambivalent as soon as she heard the name. The reaction was an uncommon one from her, but it did make sense.

Mèmè Oshino.

Me, Kanbaru, Senjogahara—the man had saved all of us. No, he would never agree to that word choice. We’d gotten saved on our own, that was the only way to put it.

An expert on aberrations, and a rolling stone and vagrant.

A frivolous man who wore a tacky Hawaiian shirt.

He was by no means a respectable adult, but it was the immutable truth that we were obliged to him.

“Yeah,” I said. “There’s apparently a small shrine up in the mountains that isn’t being used anymore, and he said to stick this talisman on its main hall—that was the job he gave us.”

“…What’s with that?” Kanbaru sounded mystified. “The talisman part doesn’t make any sense, but to begin with, can’t Mister Oshino just do it himself? He has all the time in the world, doesn’t he?”

“I agree, but that’s our job. I went into a ridiculous amount of debt when he helped me out… Doesn’t the same go for you, Kanbaru?”

“Huh?”

“I know it’s a little fuzzier in your case, but he’s a professional,

despite everything else about him. He's not so kind that he'd lend you a hand pro bono. You're indebted to him, and you need to work to pay it off."

"Ohh, so that's why..." Kanbaru nodded, seemingly convinced.

"Yup," I picked up where she left off, "that's why I asked you to come out here. Oshino asked us to do this yesterday when I went to have Shinobu drink my blood. He said to make sure to bring you along."

"Now that you mention it, Mister Oshino did insist that he was lending me a hand… Huh. I see, it meant that I'd be in his debt."

"There you go."

"All right. No point in arguing if that's the case."

Kanbaru squeezed and latched on to my arm even tighter. There seemed to be a complicated meaning behind the act that I couldn't hope to understand, but at any rate, it looked like she'd made up her mind. She certainly came across as the upstanding type who honored her end of the bargain.

"Still," she said, "I've been near that mountain a few times but never knew there was a shrine."

"Me, neither… Even if it's fallen out of use, you'd at least expect to have heard about it. Why does Oshino know about spots that locals like us aren't aware of? I guess the same goes for that abandoned cram school he's living in now."

Maybe he was actually more knowledgeable about ruins than he was about aberrations. At the same time, like our pay phones, it really is the mark of a rural town that a forgotten shrine and cram school aren't getting overrun by weirdoes… Then again, that could be exactly how you described that cram school since Oshino and Shinobu lived there…

“But□if you’re going to put it that way,” questioned Kanbaru, “why hasn’t my other dear senior come along with us? Both of you owe Mister Oshino a□”

“Senjogahara is astute about that kind of thing, so she already paid back her debt. Remember I gave Oshino a hundred thousand yen when you were there? That was it.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, you did discuss some such matter. I see, so that’s what you meant… Hm, now there’s my senior.”

“In her case, it’s not so much about being upstanding, it’s more like she hates being indebted to people. She’s the kind of person who’d endure life all alone.”

“Did she say anything about today?”

“Hmm? No, not really. Not even a ‘be careful.’”

She really hadn’t.

Since I was technically bringing “her” junior along with me, I did make sure to bring it up with her before calling on Kanbaru, but Senjogahara’s reaction had been bland, as if I shouldn’t have troubled her with such a trivial matter. I found myself wanting to complain that it was thanks to her attitude that I’d ended up going on a date with her junior before I went on one with her, conveniently turning a blind eye to my own weak will.

“Did she say anything to you, Kanbaru?”

“Mm. She said to have you pamper me.”

“……”

She really did indulge Kanbaru.

Jeez, a tsundere was supposed to show her sweet side to her boyfriend, not her junior.

“She told me something else. ‘If Araragi tries to lay a finger on you, don’t hide it from me but report it right away. He can choose between being buried in the mountains and becoming fish food, whichever he hates more.’”

“Whichever I hate more?!”

She was merciless.

But—well.

It did seem like Hitagi Senjogahara was heading in the right direction. She’d encountered an aberration before entering high school, and apparently she’d thrown everything away, given up on everything—so this meant she was getting back to where she used to be. For someone who’d endure life all alone—learning how to interact with others couldn’t be a bad thing.

I was actually glad to see it.

Since she was human—that was good.

“Oh, right, Kanbaru. Talking about Senjogahara reminds me. It’s her birthday soon, isn’t it?”

“Yes. July seventh.”

“…Sounds like you don’t need to check your calendar for that one.”

“We’re talking about someone I love.”

“Well, I have a request about it.”

“Anything you want. This body belongs to you, to begin with. There’s no need to check with me over every little thing, use me as you see fit.”

“No, it’s nothing that big, just that it’s a special day that I thought we could celebrate. The only thing is that I’ve been fairly detached from those kinds of events for a while now, and I don’t know how they go.

That's where I was hoping you could help me out, Kanbaru."

"I see. You need me to strip?"

"Even I know that birthdays aren't that kind of event! What kind of occasion are you trying to turn my girlfriend's special day into?!"

"Ah. I jumped the gun."

"There isn't going to be a time when that gun ever goes off. Go back and sit on the bench. For the rest of your life. Well, actually, I'd appreciate it if you could help out with the setup and planning. I know there was a gap in your relationship, but you probably know more about Senjogahara than I do. That's all."

"Hmm. I don't know, this is her first birthday since you started going out, so don't you think you should set the mood and spend the day alone together? I feel like me trying to help out would only get in the way."

"Get in the way?"

"Yes. An unwanted kindness can be a pain in the butt, just a nuisance."

"Ahh. I did consider that, but I thought a livelier celebration might be good for our first birthday together. I was thinking of inviting Oshino and Shinobu, and maybe this one grade schooler that I know, and holding a nice little birthday party."

The idea did have issues in that Senjogahara disliked Oshino, Shinobu, and Hachikuji, but that was something I needed to power through. I had to do my best to create a situation where she couldn't say so outright.

"Well□if you're okay with it, so am I," Kanbaru consented.

"Really? That sounds evasive."

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying so, while I do have the utmost respect for your intentions, she might want to spend the time alone with you.”

“You think she’s that sanctimonious about our relationship?”

She hadn’t even gone on a date with me.

I’d been asking her out pretty clearly, too.

Of course, it hadn’t been the right time, what with Kanbaru and the skills test right afterwards.

Her defenses were just so tight.

“At any rate,” I noted, “you seem to care about me and Senjogahara in a pretty normal way when you and I are supposed to be rivals fighting over her.”

“Well, true… But right now, it’s like I’m in love with her even as she’s going out with you… And I love you, her boyfriend, almost as much as I love her.”

“……”

Did she just confess to me?

Uh oh, my pulse was rising.

She might even feel my heartbeat through our arms.

What a simpleton I was.

“…You know, you’re letting Senjogahara influence you a little too much,” I scolded her. “The sun or a street lamp or whatever you made this vow to, you don’t have to see me in such a positive light just because I’m Senjogahara’s boyfriend. You don’t need to like someone just because she does□”

“No. That’s not what it is,” Kanbaru said awfully bluntly.

I felt a little cowed by her forceful gaze.

If something needed to be said, she said it, juniors and seniors be damned.

“Then,” I asked her, “could you still be carrying around baggage from last month? I don’t mind at all, really… You know what they say, hate the sin, what’s for dinner□”

“It’s not that□either,” Kanbaru stated, seemingly overlooking my gaffe. “I’m fortunate that you’re able to forget and forget, but that isn’t what it is.”

“Forget and forget…”

She made me sound so feebleminded.

I had a feeling she wasn’t wrong, though.

And it certainly was simpler that way.

“Please, listen to me,” she said. “I was stalking you, okay?”

“……”

What a thing to say so unabashedly to my face.

Like I was the one who needed a talking-to.

“So□” she continued, “I think I have a very good idea about the kind of person you are. I really believe that you deserve no less. Even if you weren’t her boyfriend, even if last month never happened, no matter how we’d met□I would have seen you as someone worthy of my respect. I swear, upon my legs.”

“…Oh.”

Well, in that case.

It was foolish even to contemplate other scenarios where Kanbaru and I could have met…

However.

“If it’s upon your legs□what can I say.”

“Right… I respect you so much that even if you’re bringing me to some lonely mountain on the pretext that Mister Oshino has a job for us, only to force upon me every single lustful desire that your heart cradles, I can forgive you with a smile.”

“I don’t want that kind of respect!”

And “pretext”?

She didn’t trust me at all!

“Huh? Hold on,” she said. “Are we really not proceeding to it?”

“Don’t act so genuinely surprised!”

“Wait, are you having the girl make the first move? A-ha… Your plan is to insist to your lover that it wasn’t cheating because you’d been tempted.”

“Now I get it, Kanbaru, that’s what you’re trying to do! You’re plotting to wreck my relationship with Senjogahara through this! You’re using your body, no less!”

“Oops…”

“Don’t stick your tongue out at me! You look so damn adorable, moron!”

So scheming.

Well, I knew it had to be a joke, of course.

…It was a joke, right?

“But speaking of birthdays,” she said, “it seemed a little suggestive to me when I heard that a crab had possessed her.”

“I don’t know if ‘possessed’ is the right word, but…pardon me? Suggestive? What’s suggestive about a crab? And what does it have to

do with her birthday?"

"Well, she's a Cancer, isn't she?"

"Huh?" July seventh, right? "What are you talking about? July seventh would be Gemini."

"Huh? No…um, I don't think that's correct."

"Really? Am I the one who has it wrong? When I heard she was born on July seventh, I assumed that she was a Gemini…" I remembered it well because I'd thought then that Senjogahara having an identical twin with the same personality would suck to high heaven. "Well, it's not like I know the exact dates of the zodiac or anything… No, but wait. I want to say Cancer starts on July twenty-third?"

"Oh." Kanbaru seemed to have realized something. "…A quick pop quiz."

"Why?"

"What sign is someone who's born on December first?"

"Huh?" Come on, that didn't even count as a quiz. "I know the answer to that one, at least. Ophiuchus, right?"

"Pfft!" Suruga Kanbaru burst out laughing. "Ha…haha, ahaha!"

It seemed to hit her so hard that her knees shook and she couldn't stay standing, and she was even clinging to my arm. She went from pushing her chest against my elbow to trapping my upper arm in her cleavage, but her irritating laughter made it extremely hard for me to register my good fortune.

"Wh-What's so funny… Did I make that bad of a mistake?"

"O-Ophiuchus… Pff, pffahaha! Ophiuchus… Ahaha, in this day and age, y-you're using the thirteen-sign zodiac…"

"……"

Oh.

So that's what it was.

Right, I understood now. July seventh was Cancer in the twelve-sign zodiac…

"Ah, that was a good laugh. Five years' worth."

Kanbaru finally raised her head. There were tears in her eyes. I understood why she might have found it so funny, but she'd laughed at me way too much.

"Okay, let's go, li'l Ragiko."

"You're openly treating me worse! All of that respect you had for me as your senior, gone! This actually hurts pretty bad!"

"O-Oh. My mistake, dear senior Araragi."

"Cover for me as thanks for making you laugh that much."

"Cover? How, when you sounded so sure? To begin with, why are you even using the thirteen-sign zodiac?"

"I mean, what can I say? Didn't we switch from a twelve- to a thirteen-sign zodiac a while ago?"

"We tried, but it didn't spread and people gave up on it. How could my esteemed senior Araragi not know that?"

"Hmm…maybe that was right around the time I stopped caring about astrology…"

Okay…

So it never caught on…

"I guess aberrations are the same," I mused. "You could have the most terrifying ghoul or ghost imaginable, but it never existed if it didn't catch on."

“No, I don’t think it’s anything so deep…”

“I wonder what Ophiuchus is, anyway.”

“It’s a summer constellation with the alpha star Ras Alhague. It’s well known for containing Bernard’s Star, which has the largest proper motion of any fixed star.”

“No, I’m not talking about the stars themselves… I’m wondering why it has that name. Does it have to do with snakes or something?”

“I want to say that it represents the master physician Asclepius from Greek mythology. He’s grasping a snake in the constellation, which is why it’s known as Ophiuchus, or the ‘serpent-bearer.’”

“Huh.” I nodded. I’d had no idea. “Kanbaru, I’m surprised you know all that, both about the stars themselves and the constellation. Do you actually know a lot about stars or something?”

“Does it seem unlike me?”

“To be honest.”

“Hm. Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I know a lot about them, but I do like looking up at the night sky. It’s a simple one, but I also own a telescope. Twice a year, I go to a stargazing event they hold at an observatory in another prefecture.”

“Huh. So not just a planetarium. Experience over knowledge, huh?”

“I like planetariums too, but those places don’t have shooting stars, do they? Fixed stars and constellations are nice, but I prefer fleeting shooting stars.”

“I see. How romantic.”

“Yes. I hope that someday soon, Earth becomes a shooting star, too.”

“Is humanity going to be all right?!”

I couldn't believe her.

Where was the romance in that?

That was a disaster movie.

"…And it looks like we've arrived after all of that talk," I told her. "There should be stairs around here, according to Oshino□oh, there they are…Well, more like a game trail…"

A roadside mountain.

I didn't know its name.

Oshino didn't, either.

I should say the road had been paved to bypass the mountain, but branching off from the sidewalk, toward the peak, were steps□or at least their traces. Well, actually, you could still call them steps. I'd heard that our athletic teams came jogging all the way here, as Kanbaru mentioned too, but I doubted any of them took these stairs up the mountain. It was overgrown with foliage, and if I hadn't known in advance, I probably wouldn't have noticed or recognized them as such.

A game trail.

Mm, no□I saw signs of trampled grass when I looked closer. Footsteps. So the stairs weren't totally unused, but then, whose tracks could they be? If I remembered correctly, Oshino hadn't even approached the shrine, so they couldn't be his. He also said the shrine was already out of use, so it couldn't be anyone who worked there…

Was it overrun with weirdoes?

Unlikely.

"……"

I looked at the girl attached to my left arm.

Her guard was always so low, just like now, but she was such a cute

girl… Would she be okay? If there were weirdoes who were textbook cases of weirdoes up there…I could protect her only so well alone. Some vampire blood still coursed through me, but that merely improved my metabolism and healing, anyway.

“Balkan, my junior.”

“What is it, Ragiko?”

“Your left arm—how’s it feeling?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, I was just wondering if anything was new or unusual about it.”

“Not in particular.”

Not in particular—she said.

True, she’d been holding that heavy-looking bundle in her left hand without switching the whole time, like it was nothing…

Maybe there was no need to worry…if having the power of that monkey left arm on top of her base stamina was the new normal for Kanbaru…

“Yup,” she assured, “it’s still strong enough that I can shove you down onto a bed with my left arm alone.”

“I’m not really seeing why it has to be onto a bed.”

“Then, strong enough that I could bridal-carry you with my left arm alone.”

“It’s not a bridal-carry if you do it with one arm, it’s more like a bandit making off with a village lass… But I guess I’m fine with that one.”

“Heheheh,” Kanbaru let out a vaguely obscene laugh in reply. She seemed to be enjoying herself. “You really are kind…worrying yourself

over me, of all people. Ahh, I could feel safe entrusting my body and soul to you…"

"Why are you blushing and saying that like you're deeply moved? What are you, a mind reader? Stop digging up every little thing that I'm thinking or I'll have to get out my tinfoil hat."

"I may not look it now, but I was once our basketball ace. I can figure out most of what people are thinking by looking into their eyes. And we're talking about the thoughts of a senior I respect very much! As your faithful subordinate, I practically have you wrapped around my little finger."

"Don't have me wrapped around your little finger, then. What are you, a femme fatale? Hmph… All it takes is a look into my eyes? Yikes. I mean, that really does sound like telepathy… Okay, Kanbaru, what am I thinking right now?"

"Probably something like, 'Would this woman take off her bra if I asked her to?'"

"Is that how you see me, Kanbaru?!"

"Want me to take it off?"

"Um, nkk… No, of course not!"

I'd hesitated for a moment despite myself.

Kanbaru only gave me a brisk nod along with an "Oh, then," and continued to cling to my arm… Her complete non-reaction to my hesitation seemed to be intended as a show of tolerance, almost maternally broad in scope, for the ulterior motives of men, and it honestly got under my skin…

She was the one who'd gone in that direction.

Where did she get off acting like I was her younger husband?

“Let’s go,” I urged. “We haven’t even climbed up this mountain and I’m already tired…”

“Mm.”

“Do be careful where you step, though. Aside from bug bites, it sounds like there’s a ton of snakes around here.”

“Did you say ‘snake’?”

Pfft, laughed Kanbaru.

I must have reminded her of our earlier conversation about Ophiuchus.

I continued, unperturbed, “Well, apparently they aren’t poisonous. Snakes have long fangs, though, and you wouldn’t want to get a bite wound out here.”

“…Yours is on your neck, right?”

“Yeah. It’s from a demon, though, not a snake.”

We spoke as we climbed the mountain’s stairs. Our coordinates hadn’t changed much, but the humidity seemed to shoot up the moment we entered the mountain, and it was sweltering. The stairs led to this shrine according to Oshino, but I hadn’t asked how high up it was. I didn’t imagine it was actually on the summit, but…that would be okay. It wasn’t that tall of a mountain.

“My left arm,” Kanbaru said. “Mister Oshino told me it should heal by the time I’m twenty.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes. Well, only if I *don’t do it again.*”

“That’s good to hear. So it means you can play basketball again after you’re twenty.”

“Right. Of course, that hope will be crushed if I slack off, so I need

to keep working out on my own.” After saying that, she asked me, “What about you?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Are you going to be a vampire for the rest of your life?”

“…I.”

The rest of my life.

A vampire for the rest of my life.

A mock human.

Something other than human.

“I’m fine with it. In any case unlike your left arm, it’s not that much of an issue. The sun, crosses, garlic, and all that stuff doesn’t bother me at all. Ha ha and I heal right away if I get hurt, so I got a good deal, you know?”

“I don’t want to hear you acting tough. What Mister Oshino told me is that you resigned yourself to being a vampire to save that girl Shinobu.”

Shinobu.

That was what the vampire who’d attacked me was called now.

That blonde vampire.

She was now living in the ruins of that cram school together with Oshino.

“……”

That bastard really was loose-lipped.

I hoped he hadn’t told Senjogahara. I assumed it was on account of the left arm that he provided Kanbaru with an example she could reference, so I probably didn’t need to worry…

“That’s not true,” I maintained. “They’re just *residual effects.* As far as Shinobu—well, she’s my responsibility. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it saving her. We have an understanding, and I’m sticking to it. It’s fine… I’m no basketball star so I can’t tell just by looking into your eyes, but you’re worried about me, aren’t you, Kanbaru?”

“…Well.”

“I’m fine. Your worries are misplaced—just like with the deed you kept bringing up.”

I cut the topic short with a little joke at the end. Kanbaru seemed to want to say more, but probably realizing it was better left unsaid, fell silent. If something needed to be said, she said it—but if she only wanted to say it, she could hold her tongue. She was too good of a woman to be wrapped around my left arm, honestly.

“Ah.”

“Oh.”

Just as our conversation ended, someone came down the stairs. Perfect timing. The person was jogging down the treacherous steps a bit precariously.

A girl, probably in middle school.

She was fully protected in her long sleeves and long pants.

There was a bag around her waist.

A hat, pulled far down on her head.

I was very unsure if she could see in front of her, and even if she could, she was running down the stairs looking only at her feet, so a couple of false moves and she might have collided with us head-on. It was a good thing that Kanbaru and I had just hit a pause in our conversation; we noticed her quicker than we normally would have and

shifted to one side of the stairs to dodge her.

The moment she passed by.

She looked at the two of us—and seeming to notice us for the first time, made a startled expression, and just as soon, began descending the stairs at an even faster pace. Her figure was out of sight before we knew it. She'd sped up so much that I expected her to trip and fall at least twice before she reached the street.

"……?"

Hmm?

There was something about the girl…

It was like I'd seen her somewhere before, or maybe not.

"What's the matter?" asked Kanbaru.

"Oh, nothing…"

"Well, I didn't expect to run into someone on this mountain trail. I didn't want to say it in front of you, but I was convinced we were on a road to death. She was pretty cute, too. You said the shrine isn't being used anymore, but maybe some people still visit it, after all?"

"A girl like that, though?"

"Faith knows no age."

"Sure, but still."

"Just as love knows no age."

"You didn't need to add that, did you?"

Even as I spoke, I tried to remember where I'd seen the girl before, but I couldn't in the end. Then again, I thought, maybe I didn't know her in the first place. I came to the conclusion that it might have been a simple case of déjà vu.

"Well, let's keep climbing," I told Kanbaru. "If someone came from

up there, that means there has to be something above us. I was wondering the whole time if Oshino might be playing a prank on me, but this rules it out."

"Yep. As it almost does the possibility that you're tricking me."

"It not only actually existed but hasn't been ruled out yet?"

"I'll forgive you with a smile on my face."

"Not a word more about how sexually frustrated you are, okay?"

"You can call it a mistake, I won't mind. I don't intend on pestering you afterwards."

"You're already pestering me."

"Oh. In that case, how about this? You just go ahead and relieve my frustration, and I'll probably stop harassing you. It's the easiest and fastest way to calm a bitch in heat."

"Well, that's a first, a woman referring to herself that way…"

"It's only embarrassing in the beginning. Let's hurry and get this out of the way so there's less trouble down the line."

"I'm going on ahead."

"Abandonment play, I see."

"And you can go home!"

"So cold to my advances… Do you not like women who take the lead? I guess I need to act like I don't really want this, then."

"Whatever, I don't care."

"Just imagine. We're holding hands against my will now… You left me with no choice, threatened me with violence, and ordered me to. And I hesitantly ask you, 'L-Like this?'"

“Uh…if you thought that’d get me excited, actually it doesn’t, dammit!”

Nope.

Absolutely not.

“Hmph. A prude. More indifferent than cold. Being treated like air is making me lose confidence in my feminine charms. Do you not care about me at all?”

“No, that isn’t true. But I have a girlfriend, and her name is Senjogahara. If I didn’t behave indifferently, that would be a problem, no?”

“But you two seem to have a platonic relationship. I’m sure you need some space where you can unleash your pent-up sexual desires.”

“No, I don’t! And don’t volunteer to be part of that space!”

“She can take care of your emotional needs while I support your physical ones. Behold, a golden triangle.”

“No, you behold, that’s a muck of a love triangle! Why would I ever want to get dragged into that kind of Three’s Misery situation?!”

“While he said so, Araragi seemed unable to take his eyes off my breasts. At the end of the day, he could not resist his male instincts.”

“Why are you voicing a monologue?!”

“This one is a side story, so I get to be the narrator.”

“What are you even talking about?!”

And anyway.

Side story or no, she could never become the narrator.

We’d need to shrink-wrap it before it went on the shelves.

“Hmph. This isn’t going as well as I thought,” Kanbaru lamented.

“With a body like mine, I expected the likes of you to become my plaything in no time.”

“Is that what you really thought about me?!”

A platonic relationship…

That was one way to describe a cool girlfriend who wouldn’t even go on a date. Either way, it looked like others could tell. I always made fun of manga where couples who’re supposed to be going out drift apart and make up over and over again and cajoled them in my mind to just get on with it, but now that I had a girlfriend, I knew that’s really how it is.

Uh-uh.

You didn’t just get on with it so smoothly.

“If you’re going to call me a prude, then what about her?” I said. “She’s totally chaste.”

“And why not? It makes sense when you consider her past, and it only makes her that much more moé as long as you think of her as a bashful, innocent girlfriend.”

“Bashful… I don’t know, I feel like once you start identifying a trait as moé, it starts to feel less moé and more like a selling point.”

“Well, if she is selling, I don’t see how it’s wrong to take her up on the offer.”

“You’re right about that.”

We climbed the stairs.

The grass trampled underfoot that I noticed down below must have been that girl’s, I thought, and arrived at the shrine about five minutes later… Like the stairs, it was in such a state of disrepair that I wouldn’t have recognized it as such if I hadn’t been told beforehand. My concerns

about weirdoes hanging around were proved utterly meaningless. Countryside or not, weirdo or not, no person would choose to be there for a single second. I could just barely tell it was once a shrine from the *torii* gate, but it wasn't clear which of the structures was the main hall. I'd have to figure it out based on the layout.

Could the girl from earlier have been here too?

For what, though?

There clearly weren't any gods in this shrine.

Even a god would have fled.

To put it like Oshino might, the gods are everywhere□but even so, it didn't feel like they'd be here. Whatever… I'd get my job out of the way. All I had to do was place the talisman, which ranked it among one of the easier jobs that Oshino had tasked me with so far. I took the talisman I'd received from him out from my pocket.

But then.

"Ungh."

Kanbaru□hopped off of my arm.

That pleasant sensation that had been with me for so long disappeared from my elbow.

"What's wrong, Kanbaru?"

"…I guess I'm feeling tired?"

"Tired?"

From what?

Climbing those stairs?

Yes, it was a decent number of steps, but it didn't seem like enough to wind a jock like Kanbaru. Even I was only breathing a little heavier

than usual.

But Kanbaru really did seem tired, and her face looked pale, somehow. It was the first time I'd ever seen her in such a state.

"Hunh… Wanna take a break somewhere around there?" I offered. "Um…I guess the only place you could sit would be…on top of a rock… But I feel like sitting down on the wrong rock in a shrine could get you cursed…"

Putting aside whether there were any gods around at the shrine to curse us□something still felt wrong about it. I knew from experience that when my guts warned me like that, it was best to stop.

What to do in that case, though?

As I worried over the question, Kanbaru proposed, "How about we just have lunch?"

"Lunch?"

"Yes. It might be an impolite request and a breach of etiquette for a junior to suggest that we eat, but when I don't feel well, it usually goes away if I fill my tummy up with food."

"……"

She was like a manga character.

What a funny junior, even when she didn't feel well.

"He did say not to eat until we placed the talisman, though… Something about keeping our bodies pure. Okay, then why don't you go and find a place where you can spread out all those lunch boxes? I'm not the biggest fan of lunching at a deserted shrine, but I guess it has a charm of its own. I'll run over and slap on this talisman while you do."

"Mm. Yes, let's do that. Sorry, but I'm going to leave the job in your hands."

“Later.”

Turning my back on Kanbaru, I pushed through the grass toward the structures. Oshino had said to place the talisman on the main hall, but I wasn’t sure where exactly it needed to go… Inside, or could I just put it on the door? I would say that Oshino’s lack of directions was at fault for my ignorance, but then, his directions were always lacking. Maybe he was trying to tell me to think for myself.

Anyway, I decided to take a look at the edifices, and as I did, I thought again about the girl we’d passed earlier. I didn’t know why, but she bothered me… No, it wasn’t that.

It was like I’d seen her.

Like I’d met her.

But more immediately I *felt* something about her.

Not that I knew what that something was.

“I do feel like I’ve met her before, though… Where was it? It’s not like I get to know middle schoolers often…”

My little sisters were one thing, but…

My little sisters?

“Hm…I wonder.”

I ended up placing the talisman on the door of a building that I took to be the main one. Actually, I felt like it might collapse in on itself if I opened the door, so you could say I had no other choice.

I gently walked away and returned to the gate. Kanbaru hadn’t returned yet. I thought about pulling out my phone…but realized that she’d never told me her number. And now that I thought about it, I hadn’t given her mine, either.

That cell phone of hers was useless after all.

“Heyyy, Kanbaru!”

And so I ended up yelling out loud.

But there was no reply.

“Kanbaru!”

I tried yelling in an even louder voice but the result was the same.

I suddenly felt anxious.

She couldn’t not have heard my voice if she were around. While Senjogahara might, Kanbaru of all people would never leave me and head back home without a word. Losing sight of someone in a place like this could only mean

“Kanbaru!”

I started to run, confused.

She said she wasn’t feeling well. Maybe she collapsed while looking for a place to eat… Was that what it was? Worst-case scenarios crossed my mind. How would I deal with the situation then what would be the right course of action? If something happened to her, I’d never be able to look Senjogahara in the eyes again.

But fortunately, no worst-case scenario came to pass in any form. Running around the shrine grounds, I was finally able to find her, facing away from me.

The lunchboxes were on the ground by her side.

She looked befuddled and stood completely still.

“Kanbaru!” I said to her, placing my hand on her shoulder.

“Hyeek!” A jolt shook her, and she turned around. “O-Oh… It’s just you.”

“What a warm greeting.”

“Ah…I’m sorry. What an unthinkable thing to say to someone I’m greatly indebted to. I was just so surprised… You suddenly grabbed my flesh, after all.”

“‘Flesh’? Come on.”

Her shoulder.

“Allow me to make up for my faux pas with my body,” she said. “I might pretend to resist a little, but it’s all a performance to make the scene more exciting, okay?”

“Good, you seem to be in a normal state of mind if you’re able to prattle on like that. I’m relieved. Yeah, I’m fully aware that you’re saying that to be ridiculous. So enough of that. You really do shriek in a cute way, you know.”

Her face was still pale.

In fact, she looked even worse.

It didn’t seem like the right time to be poking fun at her unexpected shriek.

“What’s up, are you okay? If you’re feeling that bad yeah, if I cleaned it up a bit, you could probably lie down on the porch of the main shrine back there. Let’s do that, I can carry you there on my back. If you’re worried about how sanitary it might be, I could lay down my jacket ”

“No…that’s not it.” Kanbaru pointed directly ahead. “Look at that...”

“Huh?”

I did as she said and looked in the direction she pointed.

At the forest a bit past the shrine grounds.

She pointed at a single thick tree.

At the base of that tree was a snake chopped into pieces.

A snake, slain, cut into five its long, winding, squirming body, chopped.

Into five.

Slain.

But its head looked alive.

Its tongue flicking and its mouth open wide.

It was moaning in agony.

Or so it looked.

"……!"

I was struck silent by the sight

And I suddenly remembered the kid's name.

The girl we'd passed.

Right.

The girl's name was Nadeko Sengoku.

“This one—and then this one, I guess. Oh, that book might not be very useful. My apologies to whoever wrote it, but all it really does is tell you to memorize things. This book should be better if you’re aiming for efficiency,” Tsubasa Hanekawa said—pulling one book after another off the shelves and handing them to me.

One, two, three, four, and five.

The location—a big-box bookseller not far from Naoetsu High.

Monday, June twelfth.

After school.

Hanekawa, class president, and I, class vice president, headed to a bookstore together on the way home from meeting and preparing for the culture festival, which loomed later in the week on Friday and Saturday. Well, it was more like I’d asked Hanekawa and she agreed to come with me.

Braids, glasses.

A class president among class presidents.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, the ultimate model student.

“Sorry, Hanekawa…but I’m about to go over my budget.”

“Huh? What’s your budget?”

“Ten thousand yen. I have a little more back at home, but that’s all I have in my wallet.”

“Oh. Yeah, study-aids are fairly expensive. You can’t complain when you consider what’s in them, of course. Okay, then I’ll take cost-effectiveness into consideration on top of the positives and negatives. So

let's return this book for…this one instead."

Tsubasa Hanekawa□

Another person who had become involved with an aberration. But perhaps she needed to be placed in a different category from me, Kanbaru, and even Senjogahara□the reason being that she had no recollection of her involvement. She'd forgotten every last bit of that nightmare of a Golden Week that rivaled even my personal hell of a spring break.

But I remembered.

For me, a demon.

For Kanbaru, a monkey.

For Senjogahara, a crab.

And for Hanekawa□a cat.

"But," Hanekawa said abruptly, "it makes me kind of happy."

"…What does?"

"Being asked by you to help pick out study-aids. It's like maybe all my efforts didn't go to waste if you're going to take school seriously."

"……"

No.

Her efforts didn't have much to do with it.

She did force me to become class vice president in a rehabilitation attempt, having mistaken me for a delinquent…

She could be off, or more like a runaway train.

"Er, I'm not sure if I'm taking school seriously," I disabused her. "It's just that I should start thinking about what to do after graduation."

"After graduation?"

"Maybe I should say college? Senjogahara and I were talking about

it the other day. And I heard what school she was trying to get into…”

“Ah. Senjogahara wanted to get into the local national university, right? She’ll be admitted on a recommendation.”

“…You know everything, don’t you.”

“Not everything. I just know what I know.”

It was the same back-and-forth as always.

Actually, Hanekawa had taken an interest in Senjogahara before I ever did, so maybe, as the class president, it was natural for her to know that much. Come to think of it, Senjogahara didn’t seem to hate Hanekawa too badly for her excessive fussing. Inviting Hanekawa to the birthday party I was currently planning for Senjogahara probably wouldn’t earn her full wrath.

But, having a girlfriend who might get angry that I planned a birthday party for her…

“So, Araragi. Are you actually trying to get into the same university as her?”

“Don’t tell her yet, okay? I don’t want to get her hopes up in some weird way.” I hid my embarrassment□or not exactly, but still flipped through a random study-aid within my reach. “Actually, I feel like she’d say something standoffish to me.”

“Brutal… Aren’t you two boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Well yes, but. It’s like she believes that good fences make good strangers…”

“Huh? Oh, I get it. A gag based on ‘good fences make good neighbors’? Ahaha, you’re funny, Araragi.”

“Don’t go around explaining people’s jokes!”

And don’t call it a gag.

And don't call me funny.

"Ahaha, Araragi! You must have been thinking that one up from the moment you said, 'I feel like she'd say something standoffish to me'! It would've been easy to tell that I'd reply, 'Aren't you two boyfriend and girlfriend?' Oh, you can be so elaborate!"

"Please, stop stripping down how I talk!"

I felt buck naked.

I put us back on track.

"It's not like I have a specific goal, but I did better on the skills test the other day than I expected. I was just trying to avoid a failing grade… It of course pales in comparison to you or Senjogahara, but I did all right thanks to studying seriously for the first time in a while."

"I forget, did you study one-on-one with her?"

"Yeah."

In case you were wondering, Senjogahara effortlessly got the seventh highest overall score while watching over this washout as he studied. It was impressive, or maybe brilliant. She was at the level where my only possible reaction was admiration.

One more fact, in case you were wondering. Tsubasa Hanekawa got the top overall score.

It went without saying.

She took first place in every subject.

Close to a perfect score, apparently.

Putting that aside, while my scores weren't worthy of being posted and ranked in any subject aside from math, they had still dramatically improved compared to all the skills tests I had taken up to that point.

They'd improved to the point that I was starting to have a little

dream.

It was now June.

So if I hunkered down and studied for the next half-year□

It was enough to make me think along those lines.

“With Senjogahara tutoring me, I felt like I understood how to study for the first time in a while… It reminded me of how it used to feel in middle school. I’d given up on that kind of thing at some point during my first year here.”

“Huh… I think that’s a good thing. I do think that wanting to go to the same university as your girlfriend is a bit impure as far as motives go, but the doors to scholarship are always open. Yes, in that case, I think I’ll do everything I can to help you, too.”

“……”

Being educated by Senjogahara was scary, but education-by-Hanekawa was a pretty frightening thought, too…

Not that I told her that.

In fact, no matter how I looked at it, I needed Tsubasa Hanekawa’s help if I wanted to get into college.

“So,” I asked her, “if I can get a good idea of where I stand, I might start going to a test-prep school starting summer break. Do you know of any good ones?”

“Hmm. I can’t say that I do. I’ve never gone to a cram school or anything.”

“I see…”

Damned genius.

“But I’ll ask my friends.”

“You really know how to look out for people, you know that? I

appreciate it. Of course, while I may not be able to get in this year, if I plan my studies with the understanding that I'll take a year off after high school, I think I can do it."

"Why are you setting your sights so low before you've even started? If you're going to do this, try getting in on your first attempt… And when are you thinking of telling Senjogahara?"

"Again, once I have a good idea of where I stand…I guess? I know I'll need her help, too. It sounds like the national university Senjogahara is trying to get into offers various exam types, so I could choose a set that focuses as much as possible on math…"

"Makes sense." Hanekawa handed another study-aid to me. "Okay. That's ten thousand yen on the dot."

"…What? No way. You found a combination that costs exactly that much? You can really pull off a trick like that?"

"It's just addition, you know."

"……"

It was just addition, sure… But these were mostly four-digit numbers, in her head, while having a conversation… I'd thought math was my strong suit… It seemed I couldn't hope to compare to Hanekawa even when it came to arithmetic.

The thought sapped my motivation a little, or put a dent in me…

I was feeling discouraged from the very start.

In other words, I'd have to spend half a year busting my ass and in the throes of an immeasurable inferiority complex toward Hitagi Senjogahara and Tsubasa Hanekawa…

Well.

I just had to bust my ass.

“Incidentally, Araragi.”

“Why so formal all of a sudden?”

“Tell me more about what you said earlier. You found the corpse of a snake cut into five at the overgrown ruins of a shrine—what happened then?”

“Huh? Oh, that.”

I’d told her about it after school while we were getting ready for the culture festival. I’d only meant to update her on Oshino, but it had happened only yesterday. I couldn’t stop myself from talking about it given how fresh it was in my mind. I didn’t go into any detail because hearing about the cruel deaths of small animals could only be unpleasant, but it seemed to have grabbed Hanekawa’s attention.

“Nothing, really. Kanbaru and I did at least dig a hole for the snake and bury it…but when we wandered around the area after that, there were dead snakes all over the place.”

“Dead—all over the place?”

“Yeah. Chopped-up snakes all over the place.”

Several of them.

And then I stopped counting.

I gave up—on burying them, too.

Kanbaru had looked legitimately sick.

“So we ended up going straight down the mountain… And then we ate the lunch that Kanbaru made at a nearby park. I was surprised at just how good it was, but when I asked, she told me that her grandma helped her make them. Actually, the other way around. It was more like she helped her grandma make them. When I asked her what exactly she did, it was ‘I got the knives ready’ and ‘I boiled some water’ and ‘I

watched to make sure the pot didn't boil over, but it did.' Wanting to be a good cook when she's already so athletic is a bit greedy, huh?"

"That might be true. But it's too bad about Kanbaru. She'd be right in the middle of a tournament right now if not for her arm injury."

"……"

Oh, right.

I was keeping that part a secret.

I'd nearly slipped up and run my mouth.

The only people at Naoetsu High who knew the truth behind Suruga Kanbaru's retirement were me and Senjogahara. No one would be added to that list, and that seemed perfectly fine.

The funny thing was that once we ate lunch, Kanbaru really did feel better again. In typical born-athlete form, her body seemed to be unusually efficient at absorbing energy.

"Well, Araragi… That must have been a handful."

"Yeah. Killing snakes that way seemed like a ritual or something and made me think. Kind of gave me the chills, it's a very uncool thing to do. Plus the place is an abandoned shrine, you know? Oh, by the way, did you know there was a shrine there?"

"Yup." Hanekawa nodded briskly, as if to say, of course she did. "Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, right?"

"Kita-Shirahebi?" North Whitesnake Shrine□

"Yes, I guess they must have worshiped a snake god there. I'm not that familiar with it, though. I just happen to know as a local."

"I feel like it's precisely the kind of place you don't know as a local… Plus, you already seem plenty familiar with it, but huh… Killing snakes in a spot where they were once worshiped… It really does seem

like a kind of ritual to me. Maybe I should…report it to Oshino?"

An aberration.

I hoped I was making too much of it.

But there was the bit about Sengoku, too.

Nadeko Sengoku.

"……"

…I didn't want the conversation going in this direction.

Hanekawa had forgotten her involvement with an aberration. She remembers being helped by Oshino, at least, but the part where she was charmed by a cat and *everything else that followed* she has no memory of it. That isn't the only reason, but I don't want Hanekawa to have much to do with aberrations. She doesn't need to know about what happened with Senjogahara, or Kanbaru, or Hachikuji not now, not later.

That's how I see it.

Because she's a cool person.

My concerns turned out to be extraneous here, though.

"But you know, Araragi, that's not what I wanted to talk about. I meant that dealing with Kanbaru must have been a handful."

"……"

If anything.

It seemed like I needed to be worrying about myself.

"Dealing. With. Kanbaru," she punctuated her words. "Must have been a handful, I'm asking."

She was grinning.

Her smiling face was actually scarier than anything…

"O-Oh… Yeah, she did suddenly start feeling unwell. I wondered

what it could be, but…it was nothing, fortunately."

"That's not what I'm talking about," Hanekawa said in a serious tone. Well, she said just about everything in a serious tone, but especially this time. "Don't you think it's a problem being a little too friendly with your girlfriend's junior? I think it's fine for you to be somewhat friendly with her since you were the one who helped them make up, but you shouldn't be linking arms, should you?"

"What was I supposed to do? She's a friendly girl."

"Do you think that passes as an excuse?"

"Well…"

It didn't, did it.

No matter how you looked at it.

"Part of me can understand," she said. "I suppose this must be the first time you have a junior who looks up to you. You didn't have any extracurriculars in middle school either and went straight home then, too, right? It's nice to have a cute little junior. Or could it have simply been that you enjoyed how Kanbaru's breast felt? You perv."

"Ngkk…"

I found it vaguely difficult to argue.

She was wrong, but even if I told her that, there was no way to keep it from sounding like a lie.

Hanekawa continued, "I'm sure Kanbaru is feeling insecure to some degree because of her retirement, but isn't that where you should jump in and set the record straight?"

"Uhhm…"

"Wouldn't it be a shame if the Valhalla Duo split up over you when you helped bring them back together?"

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Weak-willed.

Feeble me.

“But in that sense,” observed Hanekawa, “I guess Kanbaru doesn’t have much experience with men, either. This is an odd way to put it, but maybe being treated like a star for so long deprived her of those kinds of opportunities.”

“Probably.”

Plus, she was a sapphist.

Plus, she was in love with Senjogahara.

Those were secrets, too.

“And you don’t seem too good at communicating about this stuff, either,” the class president went on. “While that’s sometimes a valid excuse, it isn’t always.”

“I dunno. Senjogahara keeps telling me to take good care of Kanbaru. ‘I won’t overlook any rudeness toward my junior,’ and that kind of thing. It makes me wonder who really has the power here. Like, if this is a love triangle, it’s one hell of an isosceles. It even sounds like Kanbaru was told by Senjogahara to have me pamper her.”

Right.

What didn’t make sense here was Senjogahara’s psychology.

What on earth was she thinking?

“Well, okay. Couldn’t it be like this?” Hanekawa gently reached for my head with both of her hands. They sandwiched it and stayed there. My own hands were full carrying a pile of study-aids so I couldn’t swat hers away.

“Huh? Wait, what?”

“Okay, go ahead.”

Hanekawa used her hands to adjust the angle of my head and pointed it directly toward her own upturned face. Our eyes met. Or so I thought, but Hanekawa’s were shut. Behind her glasses were two closed eyes, and her eyelashes seemed to be trembling. Her lips, sealed too, naturally appeared to convey a message□

“Huh? Huh? Huh?”

Wh-What was going on here?

Or rather, where was this going?

Hanekawa was the class president and someone I was indebted to, just as much as, no, even more than I was to Oshino□

B-But did I need to do something here?

She did tell me to go ahead…

Those glasses would get in the way a little, but…wait.

Wasn’t the right move here to not do anything?!

“…Like that, I guess?”

Her eyes blinked open.

Hanekawa let go.

A mischievous grin spread across her face.

“Araragi, were you about a second away?”

“N-No… What’re you saying?”

I admit, my voice was obviously cracking.

What was *I* saying?

“See. Weak-willed, feeble you.”

“……”

Coming from someone else, those words really struck me.

Not only that, I couldn’t deny it.

I wouldn't say a second away, but it was the undeniable truth that I'd wavered.

"You're kind to everyone, right, Araragi? I think that when Senjogahara sees that side of you, it makes her pretty insecure. You're the only one for her□but to take it to an extreme, it's like you'd be fine with anyone."

"…Insecure?"

Was she that sentimental of a person?

Then again, it was to help get rid of that part of her that I'd acted as a mediator between her and Kanbaru. So was Senjogahara, in turn, trying to help get rid of that part of me? No, it didn't make sense. I didn't see how that could possibly follow.

"You're quick to go with the flow, and you don't want to hurt people. Being kind is usually a good thing, of course, but it doesn't always serve the people around you. Senjogahara might not want you to become too friendly with Kanbaru, you know? But she could never tell you not to befriend her and might even end up saying the opposite□am I wrong? Like she's fine if you're friends, she wants you to be friends, in fact, but wants you to draw a clear line… Maybe Senjogahara wants you to choose her after you've compared her to Kanbaru."

"What the hell? You're not making any sense."

"Don't you think Senjogahara is in a dilemma of her own? You're very important to her as her boyfriend, and Kanbaru is very important to her as her junior."

"Uhh."

In addition, Kanbaru was a sapphist.

And Senjogahara already knew that.

Our relationships were pretty complicated when you took that into account.

“And Senjogahara is a tsundere,” Hanekawa said as if to wrap up our conversation. “I don’t think you should ever try to understand her actions in a simplistic way. You need to always be looking for the reasons behind them. If Senjogahara is important to you, I don’t think you should let your heart waver over a tiny little temptation. It really is a little irresponsible to be kind to everyone.”

“Yeah… Don’t worry, that part has hit home.”

Her live-fire exercise had worked.

I felt like I now knew for sure how flimsy I was.

…Though I did wonder about concluding our conversation with “And she’s a tsundere”… Wait, so Hanekawa knew what that word meant…

She really did know everything.

Maybe she was even starting to see through Senjogahara’s feline subterfuge.

Cats were Hanekawa’s specialty, after all.

“Speaking of which,” I asked her, “where were you planning on going to university? Tokyo, I guess? Or do students who get nationwide top scores on practice tests like you end up going overseas?”

“Huh? I’m not going to college, okay?”

“……Wha?”

Where did that bombshell come from.

She’d honestly caught me by surprise.

“You’re not…going to college?”

“Nope.”

“Is it a money problem? But this is you we’re talking about, I’m sure you can get a scholarship…”

Schools would be scrambling to grab her as their first draft pick.

I could even see her getting paid to go to school.

“It’s not like that. There isn’t really anything I’d want to study in college, anyway… Yeah, I guess I could tell you, Araragi. I’m going to go on a little journey after I graduate.”

“A-A journey?”

“I want to spend two years or so seeing the world. There are a lot of World Heritage sights you need to visit now, or they might disappear. There are times when I find myself relying on nothing but knowledge, so I think I should go out and experience more things. And if I do want to go to college, I can afterwards, and it won’t be too late.”

“……”

It was the kind of idea that floats into your head when you’re daydreaming.

But that wasn’t what it seemed to be…

Hanekawa didn’t have the grades of a student who needed an escape from the harsh realities of the struggle to get into a good school. You could tell her that entrance exams were tomorrow and it wouldn’t matter, she had the chops to handle it unassumingly. You could spring the exams on her at that very moment and she’d probably waltz her way into any school you cared to name. That’s who I was dealing with, which meant these travel plans of hers must have been fairly worked out, to the point that they weren’t going to change…

“Keep it a secret for now from our teachers and others, okay? I

think they might be surprised if they heard.”

“Yeah…I’ll bet.”

“My plan is to watch and wait for the right time to bring it up.”

“I see… Well, I have a feeling that no matter when you bring it up, there’s going to be a little more than a surprised commotion…”

It would be total pandemonium, I was sure.

If the top student at a prep school made that kind of decision, leaving behind a precedent, it could even affect the institution’s legacy. This was Hanekawa, someone they held greater than great expectations of. She had to know all of this full well…

“Please don’t tell,” she requested. “In exchange, this time around, I’ll keep everything about Kanbaru a secret from Senjogahara.”

“Hey, I don’t feel like I’ve done anything particularly questionable…”

“And neither have I. But, you know?”

“Yeah. I get it.”

Hmph.

Could Oshino have influenced her?

Hanekawa treated that rolling stone with the utmost respect. You couldn’t discount his influence, at the very least. If that were the case, it felt like Oshino had a lot of blood on his hands… What a meddlesome bastard.

So…that’s how it was. I was convinced that Hanekawa would continue to be some kind of class president even after she graduated from high school, that the gods had decided her destiny was to be a class president, but she wouldn’t be a class president or anything if she went off on a journey by herself.

I kind of felt like sighing.

Things never went smoothly.

I, a washout, was deciding this late in the game to try to go to college.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, a model student, aspired to become an outsider.

Suruga Kanbaru had retired from the basketball team early.

Mayoi Hachikuji couldn't go back to the way things were, either.

The only one who could go back was□

Hitagi Senjogahara.

"…Ow!"

Then.

Hanekawa suddenly placed her right hand against her head.

As if to support it.

"Hm? What's the matter?" I asked.

"No, it's just□I've got a headache."

"A headache?"

I recalled how Kanbaru had suddenly started to feel unwell the day before at the shrine, and I instantly began to fret. But Hanekawa soon raised her head.

"Oh, I'm fine, I'm fine. They come now and then, I started getting them a little while back. My head starts to hurt out of nowhere."

"Whoa, hold on… That doesn't sound fine at all."

"Hmm. But it gets better right away. I don't know what causes it, though… Maybe it's because I've been so busy preparing for the culture festival lately that I've slacked on my studies."

"You get headaches when you skip out on studying?"

How exactly did her body work?

Was she wearing some ring on her head like Monkey in *Journey to the West*?

She deserved to be in the diligence hall of fame.

Down to her marrow.

“Do you want me to walk you home?” I offered.

“No, it’s fine. My home□”

“Oh…right.”

A blunder.

I shouldn’t have said that.

“Sorry, I’m going to head back,” she announced. “You stay here a little longer and pick out study-aids. The ones I gave you are my suggestions, but personal preference ends up playing a big role in that kind of thing.”

“Okay. See you…”

“Yup.”

With that, Hanekawa left the bookstore like she was fleeing.

Maybe I should have walked her back until she was in the general area of her home anyway□but she was pretty headstrong, or rather, she didn’t like the idea of showing weakness to others. Since she said she was fine, I shouldn’t be a busybody.

But.

A headache…

It made me wonder a little.

For Hanekawa, a headache meant…

“……”

Hanekawa knew nothing about Senjogahara’s crab, Hachikuji’s

snail, or Kanbaru's monkey, nor anything about her own cat, at this point□

But she did know about my demon.

Not that it meant anything.

But nothing could change the fact that I owed a debt of gratitude to Hanekawa. It wasn't simply over my aberration□I couldn't begin to tell you just how often her words had saved me.

Like today.

That was why I always wanted to help her out in some way…

Sigh.

I'd have loved to be a busybody.

"…Might as well check out some of the other sections."

Though I heeded Hanekawa's advice and continued to flip through study-aids, I just wasn't used to it, and they all looked the same to me. I decided to go ahead and buy the ones she'd picked out (It ended up being six books in total. I did take the time to add up the prices, which did come out to ten thousand yen on the dot. Wow) and left the study-aids section. I was at my budget exactly so I couldn't buy anything else, but the great thing about books is that it doesn't cost a thing to peruse them. I'd look stupid checking out the latest manga with my hands full of study-aids, but on the other hand, I felt smarter just carrying them around, so maybe spending some time there wasn't such a bad idea… Actually, I was already thinking stupid...

"…Hm?"

While I didn't have a destination yet, I decided to start moving□and that's when I froze. Having seen something impossible, I couldn't help it.

I nearly dropped all the study-aids I was carrying.

No.

It wasn't exactly impossible.

The chances of two people living in the same town encountering each other at the largest bookstore in town couldn't be particularly low—at least, it was far more likely than passing by each other on a path that you could easily miss, on stairs that led to a deserted shrine.

And even the probability of that wasn't zero.

So—if they occurred on consecutive days.

It wasn't a mystery.

"…Sengoku."

There in front of the sorcery and occult shelves, located just next to the study-aid section, and reading a thick book, was Nadeko Sengoku—my little sister's old friend, Nadeko Sengoku.

She was wholly focused on reading the book—so she hadn't noticed me. It's not as if I could pass directly in front of her, so I could only see her in profile, but…I could tell it was her. Sengoku, who'd come to my home to play when she was in grade school…or who'd been brought to my home to play. It was an unusual name, Nadeko Sengoku, so I'd remembered it in full. Especially the name "Nadeko." Anyone else whose name was written with those characters would be named "Nadeshiko," and even as a grade school kid, I'd wondered where that one syllable had gone…

She was the same age as my youngest sister.

That meant—she was now in the second year of middle school.

I couldn't tell because she wasn't wearing her uniform, but she probably went to the public middle school that I'd graduated from. Few

kids all the way out where I lived chose to go to private school like my little sisters did.

"……"

I remembered Sengoku.

But did she remember me?

She looked surprised when we passed each other the day before□but that could just have been the sight of people other than her climbing up that mountain. Your friend's older brother isn't normally the kind of person you remember…which would make saying something to her odd.

But.

Snakes.

Yes, snakes□

As I was thinking, Sengoku returned the book she was reading to its shelf and began to walk. I promptly hid myself so as not to be spotted. There wasn't any particular reason for me to hide and I'd only done so reflexively, but I missed any chance I might have had to call out to her. I took a detour, using the bookshelves as walls, made sure she was gone, and stepped over to where she'd been standing until moments earlier.

I wanted to know what book she'd been reading.

I looked at its title.

"Hold on… This is□"

The book□was a hardcover priced at twelve thousand yen.

Not a book a middle schooler could buy. Even a high school kid like me couldn't purchase it with the cash I had on hand. I wouldn't be able to buy any of the study-aids.

That must have been why she contented herself with reading it in

the aisles.

But more than that.

The issue was the book's title.

I left the section in the back of the store to look around for Sengoku, but she was already nowhere to be found. Maybe she was hiding somewhere in another section, but it seemed more likely that she had exited the store. And those clothes she was wearing…

Long sleeves, long pants.

A hat pulled far down on her head, and a bag around her waist.

If my intuition was right…then yes.

"Damn… Give me a break."

I decided to go to the cash register and pay for the time being. There was a long line of shoppers waiting, but I toughed it out. Nothing good could come from getting flustered and rushing. I needed to start by calming myself down. Still unsure what to do, I placed a ten-thousand-yen bill on the cashier's tray. The clerk seemed surprised that my total came out to ten thousand yen on the dot, but what did I care. The honor didn't belong to me.

Hmm.

She was an old acquaintance…but me alone might not do.

There's only so much you can do on your own.

I had to seek someone's assistance…and the circumstances led me to just one person. Someone who might be particularly suited to this case… Hanekawa had just warned me, but I couldn't help it.

With a bag filled with study-aids in my left hand, I took out my cell phone as soon as I left the store and called the number I'd learned after we were done the day before. I was reminded again of how nervous I

felt about calling a new number for the first time, just like two days ago when I'd called her house.

The phone rang about five times.

"This is Suruga Kanbaru."

No sooner than it connected, she answered with her full name. The oddly uncommon act surprised me a little.

"Suruga Kanbaru. My special move is double jumping."

"Liar. No human can do that."

"Hm? Judging by that voice and the quipping, I'd say it's my dear senior Araragi."

"You're right, but…"

That voice and the quipping? That's how she figured it out?

I'd given her my number the day before, too. Hadn't she put it into her contacts list? Now, that was sad… Well, never mind, she just hadn't mastered using a cell phone. She didn't seem too good with tech.

"If you have some time, Kanbaru, there was something I wanted you to help me with… What are you doing right now?"

"Heheh," Kanbaru laughed daringly for some reason. "Whether I have time or not, I'll go anywhere you ask me to, no matter how far. I don't even need a reason, just give me your location and I'll be there right away."

"No, putting all that aside… If you're not free, you don't need to force yourself. I dragged you along with me just yesterday, so I'm already feeling bad. Where are you right now, and what were you doing?"

"Umm…if you must know, well…"

"That's a pretty half-hearted reply. So you're busy? In that case□"

“No, uh…yes,” Kanbaru said as if she’d made up her mind. “I can’t keep any secrets from you. I’m in my room at my home right now reading dirty books and indulging in dirty fantasies.”

“……”

I shouldn’t have been so insistent.

Now I felt like a sexual harasser.

“Oh, but don’t get me wrong,” she cautioned. “They might be dirty books, but it’s all boys’ love.”

“Please, why couldn’t you at least let me get that part wrong!”

“New releases came out today, you see, and including ones I couldn’t buy since we were in the middle of tests, I got around twenty.”

“Huh… Not one for paring down your selections?”

“Tsk tsk tsk. You ought to know that I love every pairing under the sun.”

“Oh, shut up!”

So Kanbaru had been at this same bookstore after school… It was probably the only one in the neighborhood big enough to have a dedicated boys’ love corner. But that meant our town really was tiny… If my life were a dating simulator, new flags would be popping up all the time.

“In other words, you’re not busy.”

“I guess I couldn’t argue if you put it that way. Thinking about how you and Mister Oshino would work together doesn’t exactly make me busy.”

“That’s what you meant by ‘dirty fantasies’?!”

“So where do you need me to go?”

“Don’t change the topic, no, wait, don’t put us back on topic! You’d

better tell me, Kanbaru, who's on top and who's on bottom?! I'll never forgive you if you say I'm on bottom!"

It was a stupid conversation.

Talking to her was always like this.

"Good grief, Kanbaru. It'd be nice to have an intelligent conversation with you someday… You're supposed to be pretty smart, right?"

"Yeah. My grades are definately good."

"From the way you spelled that, though…"

Anyway, I said.

Even as we entertained our idiotic conversation, Sengoku was getting farther and farther away from the store… Well, she could go as far away as she wanted—I knew where she would end up.

She was in street clothes.

Her sense of fashion wasn't refined, but that wasn't the point.

The point—was her long sleeves and long pants.

As if she was about to head to the mountains.

"The shrine we went to yesterday," I said. "We'll meet on the sidewalk by the stairs that lead up there. Um, location-wise—you must be closer, but I should get there first since I'm on a bike. I'll wait for you there."

"Really? Do you think I'm going to make you wait on me two days in a row? Your faith in me must be at rock bottom. I have my pride, and I'm not going to let a comment like that go unanswered. I'll use this opportunity to clear my name and restore my honor. I absolutely will get there first."

"I don't even know how to respond to your weird sense of pride…

but either way, get there as soon as you can. Oh, and don't forget. Long sleeves and long pants."

I was on the way back from school, so I was still in my uniform. We had just changed to our summer attire, which meant I was wearing a short-sleeved button-down, but there was nothing I could do about that now. I was wearing slacks for pants, so good enough. An insect or snake bite wouldn't be a big deal for me anyway—those vampiric "residual effects," once again.

"Okay. Your wish is my command."

"All right, see you," I said and hung up, circling behind the bookstore to the bike parking and unlocking my bicycle. More than ten minutes had passed since Sengoku left the store… I didn't know how she was getting there, but the day before, I hadn't seen any bicycle that might be hers near where those stairs began. She most likely walked… Well, either way, if she was heading to that shrine, I wouldn't catch up with her.

Now that I thought about it, Kanbaru really didn't ask me why I was summoning her…

How frighteningly loyal.

Senjogahara was obviously my superior in Kanbaru's chain of command, but being served so assiduously by someone as high-status as Suruga Kanbaru made me feel, to be honest, more scared than happy…

There didn't seem to be any way of ruining her image of me, though, which actually made me want to start acting like the ideal senior around her and not betray her overblown expectations.

Well—it didn't seem like a bad thing.

"I wonder what Senjogahara was like."

In middle school during the Valhalla Duo's honeymoon phase, what had it been like between them?

As I was thinking that, I reached my destination.

The entrance to the shrine on the nameless mountain.

I got there fast. That's a bike for you.

Or so I thought, but Kanbaru was already there.

"……"

Were there wheels on her feet or something?

There was a limit to being fleet-footed… She might have no trouble passing the average scooter and leaving it in the dust. I doubted that the automobile would have ever been invented if all of mankind could run as fast as her. If she'd gotten ready to go right after I hung up… Well, no, she'd changed into long sleeves and long pants like I'd told her (plus, having learned from the day before, she wore unripped pants and wasn't showing her navel)…

"Uh-uh," she said, "it didn't take much time at all for me to put these clothes on. In the summer, I'm always in my underwear at home."

"Kanbaru… I'm saying this purely out of concern for you, but you know I can't make any guarantees about your chastity if you keep fanning the flames of my earthly desires."

"I'm prepared for that."

"Well, I'm not, okay?!"

"I trust your sense of reason."

"I don't trust it myself!"

"Really? I'm surprised to hear that. Do you find girls only wearing underwear when they're at home so moé?"

"Not even if you were dressed in cat ears and a maid outfit would I

find you moé!”

“I see. So if we turn that around, as long as it’s not me, cat ears and a maid outfit work for you?”

“Ack, it was a trick question!”

I decided to go ahead and park my bike at least.

While I did feel somewhat guilty about parking it illegally, it wouldn’t be for long. I’d beg the law’s forgiveness. If it did get confiscated, I’d just resign myself to my fate. Beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Even taking that into account,” I remarked, “you really are fast… You could probably make it into the Olympics or something if you really tried.”

“You don’t get to go to the Olympics just because you’re fast… And I’m not cut out for track competitions, anyway.”

“Oh, I guess not.”

Senjogahara was on the track team in middle school, and they’d first met when Senjogahara heard that the basketball ace was quick and went to see Kanbaru□or something along those lines.

“From my point of view,” I said, “your speed doesn’t even seem human.”

“Hm. If it isn’t human, would that make me…amphibian?”

“Try naming an amphibian that’s a fast runner!”

“You got me there.”

“I mean, what do you stand to gain by comparing yourself to an amphibian?”

“It’s not about gain. If you would call me that, I’d present myself as such with great joy.”

“Uh oh, ‘great joy’?”

“Hurry and please call me your ‘lowly, filthy pet’!”

“There are actually two equally important things I have to say to that, and while I’d normally ignore them because it’d be hard to without tripping over my words along the way, I like you so much, Kanbaru, that I’m going ahead and pointing them out anyway! First of all, I wouldn’t keep an amphibian as a pet, and second of all, your great joy has nothing particular to do with amphibians anymore!”

If you’re curious, I’d thought of a cheetah.

Of course, they aren’t animals you’d keep as pets, either.

Agh, and I even admitted to her that I liked her a lot.

Yippee, the feeling was mutual.

“Please, don’t be so cold and just say it,” Kanbaru pleaded. “‘Lowly, filthy pet!’ You have to try it out just once. I’m sure you’ll understand if you do.”

“Why are you acting so desperate?!”

“Urk… Why won’t anyone understand? She told me no, too…”

“Even Senjogahara didn’t want to?!”

Well, actually.

Of course she wouldn’t want to.

Saying it was one thing, but Kanbaru feeling great joy?

“So, what do I need to do?” she asked me.

“Oh, right. This was no time to be amusing ourselves with small talk.”

“Do you need me to strip?”

“Why so eager to take off your clothes?!”

“If you have to take them off for me instead, I wouldn’t mind.”

“We’re not talking about who should perform the action! What are you, the embodiment of my middle school fantasies?!”

“I’m someone who tries to pursue a cheerful sexy.”

“I don’t care about your creed…”

“Okay, then let me put it this way. I’m a fairy who tries to pursue a cheerful eroticism.”

“Oh my god! All you did was change ‘sexy’ to ‘eroticism’ and ‘someone’ to ‘fairy’ and you’ve turned what you were saying into something sublime…in no way whatsoever!”

What would it take to teach this woman that men could be sexually harassed, too? It seemed like an issue I needed to address.

“Then what do you want me to do?” she complained. “Just say it, don’t hold back. I’m not a refined person, so subtlety doesn’t work on me. Whenever people are roundabout, I just get esaxpera… Esapxer… Esapxer…”

“Do you have any idea how exasperating you’re being right now?!”

“I’m sorry. I’m starting to get all beduffled.”

“Yeah, and you’re befuddling me, too!”

“So, what is it?”

“Oh□well, I’m pretty sure that up there,” I pointed at the stairs, “is someone I used to know.”

“Hm?”

“Do you remember that girl who passed by us as we were climbing these yesterday?”

“Yes. She was petite and cute.”

“I don’t know about remembering her that way…”

“To word it like you might, she was a girl with ‘pretty’ hips.”

“I wouldn’t say that!”

Well, whatever.

She was a sapphist, after all.

It made for a smoother conversation than if she didn’t remember her at all.

“I’d thought I’d seen her somewhere before…but I only remembered later. While I wasn’t a hundred percent certain yesterday, after I saw her again today at the bookstore, I knew for sure. She’s an old friend of my youngest sister’s.”

“Really, now?” Kanbaru seemed taken aback. “What a coincidence… I’m shocked.”

“Mm-hm. I was surprised, too.”

“Mm-hm. I haven’t been this surprised since I woke up this morning and saw that my alarm clock had stopped.”

“That’s awfully recent! And that’s not much of a surprise at all! It’s way too commonplace!”

“Hmm. Okay, then allow me to correct myself. Uh, I haven’t been this surprised since the Cambrian explosion.”

“Now you’ve gone too far back, and this isn’t that amazing! Don’t bring up the greatest event in Earth’s history for a coincidence like running into an old acquaintance in a small town! I’m even beginning to feel like it wasn’t such a big surprise after all now that I really think about it!”

“You can be so demanding. So you’re saying that girl is here again today?”

“Right. Probably.”

Judging by her reaction, even Kanbaru's quick feet hadn't managed to get her to the stairs before Sengoku. Of course—while I could be somewhat certain that Sengoku had come straight to where we were after leaving the bookstore, it was ultimately just my guess. If she wasn't here, she wasn't here, and that'd be the best outcome of all.

But—the book that Sengoku was reading at the bookstore.

That was the problem.

"The book she was reading?" asked Kanbaru.

"Yeah. Well, I can tell you more about it later. Anyway, about what I wanted to ask you—I may have known this girl in the past, but it's still awkward for me to speak to her. Actually, I don't even know if she remembers me, and it might look like I'm using some weird pick-up move on her—the defensive instincts of a freshly pubescent girl can be a scary thing."

"You say that like you speak from experience."

"Well, I won't deny that."

All sorts of people have told me that I'm kind to everyone, but there was a price: I'd gone through some bad experiences because of it. Not that I felt like my efforts were a waste, but it didn't feel great when I ended up not being able to help someone I might have otherwise.

"On that note, Kanbaru. You must be good with girls younger than you. You're the biggest star at our school, after all."

"That's not true anymore, and I don't feel like it ever was, but I see what you're getting at. You're an excellent judge of people. I really am good with younger girls."

"I thought as much. I knew you were the right person to call."

While not on Hanekawa's level, Kanbaru did seem to look after

others.

She'd been captain of her team in both middle school and high school.

In that sense, she was the complete opposite of the way Senjogahara was now… Or maybe I should say that Kanbaru succeeded the middle-school Senjogahara.

"To be specific, count on me," Kanbaru boasted, "to seduce any girl younger than me in ten seconds, tops."

"Bringing you here was the biggest mistake of my life!"

I didn't need that kind of goodness!

I wasn't here to ruin a girl's life!

"Don't tell me that you saw the basketball team as nothing more than a personal harem…"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"How far would you go?!"

"I'd take out the 'nothing more than.'"

"That barely changes anything!"

"Hm? So she's your youngest sister's friend… Which means that you have a little sister… In fact, two or more…"

"……!"

Oh no!

The sapphist now knew about my little sisters!

"Heheheh… I see, your little sisters… Heh heh heh, heh heh heh. Are they anything like you, I wonder□"

"Don't get any funny thoughts…and jeez, what is with that awful grin I doubt I've ever seen before?! Is that a smile you ought to be pointing at me, the object of that selfless devotion you pride yourself

on?!”

If you’re curious.

They do look like me. Both of them.

“Oh, please,” scoffed Kanbaru. “I would never lay a finger on your little sisters. Yes, seducing a younger girl or two might come easier than breathing to me, but there’s no reason for me to ever do such a thing as long as you and I stay close.”

“Damn you, that’s a veiled threat…”

“A threat? Oh my, what a grating accusation. Such shocking words from a revered senior might cause a nervous person like me to panic and, well, who knows what I might do? Don’t you think there’s, oh, something else you ought to be saying to me right now?”

“G-Gah…”

It was happening…

She was absolutely being influenced by the present-day Senjogahara!

The very definition of a bad influence.

“Ah, I think my chest is feeling a little stiff from running here. I wonder if I could find someone to give me a massage.”

“How do I not come out ahead in that deal?!”

“Joking aside,” Kanbaru said, switching to a serious tone. “Of course I wouldn’t hesitate to help since you’re asking me but you’re taking into account *what happened yesterday,* aren’t you?”

“Well yes.”

“*So that’s what this is.*”

“…Yeah.”

“Sheesh.” Kanbaru shrugged, as if she had no other choice. She

raised her bandaged left arm to scratch her head before stopping and doing so with her right hand instead. “You’re kind to everyone that’s what she told me, and it seems like it’s true. Sure, I learned that well enough while I was stalking you but I get a different impression now that I see it in person.”

“Kanbaru…”

“It feels so pointless to be indebted to you that’s how she put it.”

“……”

“It’s fine. I’m talking to myself. No, I’m talking out of turn. Okay, let’s go. If we don’t hurry, this girl might finish her business.”

Her business.

Her business at a deserted shrine.

“Yeah…you’re right.”

Side by side, the two of us took the first step up the same stairs we had climbed the day before.

Today Kanbaru wasn’t holding my hand.

“Hey, Kanbaru.”

“What is it?”

“Any plans post-graduation?”

“Post-graduation… Before my arm turned out like this, I thought college on a sports scholarship, but that’s not going to happen now. My plan is to take entrance exams and get into a school fair and square.”

“I see.”

While her left arm would heal, it wouldn’t until she turned twenty. Now seventeen, those three years had to seem long and gloomy to Kanbaru.

“I haven’t decided on a specific school,” she said, “but I’d like to go

to one with a strong basketball program so I guess a Phys Ed school."

"You're not thinking of going to the same university as Senjogahara?"

"What, is that what you're planning?"

"Actually, yeah."

But keep it a secret from Senjogahara, I said.

Yes, Kanbaru nodded.

When it came to heeding my wishes, she was my cute junior. I hated to admit it, but Hanekawa was right about this… Just having a cute junior made me happy.

"With your grades," I asked, "couldn't you try to chase after Senjogahara?"

"I don't know about that. I'm a striver, which also means my current scores are already the best I can do."

"Ah, right. But"

"Also," added Kanbaru, "what would come of spending all my time tracing her footsteps?"

"……"

That seemed like a real change in her mindset.

It wasn't like Kanbaru to say that…or maybe I had misjudged and underestimated her on this point. Still, wasn't the woman I met a month ago dedicated to tracing Senjogahara's footsteps?

Did something change?

Thanks to the aberration?

Aberrations weren't all bad.

Good or bad wasn't the question to begin with.

"Well, I say that," Kanbaru continued, "but no matter what path I

choose, I'd like to stay involved with both you and her even after we graduate. It'd be nice if the three of us could get together and take a commemorative photo for the final episode."

"Final episode…"

"Or maybe I gaze up at the twilight sky to see the two of you reflected there in the final episode…"

"Did you just kill off me and Senjogahara?!"

What a crappy ending.

To what sounded like a crappy story.

"So there's this girl named Hanekawa in my class."

"Hm."

"Do you know her?"

"No□I'm not aware of her."

"I guess you are in different years… But she's famous among us. She has the best grades of our whole year, after all. She hasn't given up her seat at the top a single time since she started at our school and is the very picture of a model student. Sounds like a joke character or something, doesn't she? I heard the other day that she didn't do the best just here but nationwide on a practice test once. I'm pretty sure she went to the same middle school as you and Senjogahara."

"Is that so. There are some incredible people out there…"

"But that incredible person says she's not going to college."

"…Is that so."

"She wants to go on a journey because there are a lot of things she wants to see. I don't even know what to make of that, but it did make me think, you know? Oh, and I guess this also needs to stay secret. It'd be a huge deal if the school found out."

“I understand… But yes, it does make you think. You could say that Naoetsu High, being what it is, doesn’t even offer any paths apart from college so setting out on an uncharted road without qualms is something.”

“Without qualms or with them, I don’t know. But it sounded like she’d made up her mind.”

It was probably because we already knew the way, having taken it once, but Kanbaru and I climbed up the stairs and reached the shrine sooner than we had the day before.

It goes without saying, but the shrine was just as desolate as yesterday.

Out in the distance I could see the talisman I’d placed on the shrine’s main hall. My eyesight was enhanced after letting Shinobu drink my blood on Saturday, and I could see everything down to the individual characters written with a red-ink brush.

It was the only difference from yesterday.

“……”

I glanced over and Kanbaru was pale. She wasn’t just moments ago, we’d been carrying on a regular conversation, but now she was visibly tired.

That was also the same as yesterday.

No she looked worse.

It wasn’t from climbing the stairs.

She wasn’t feeling ill.

It happened *the moment we entered the grounds the moment we passed through the gate.*

"…Hey, Kanbaru."

"I'm fine. Let's just hurry."

Despite her state, Kanbaru replied firmly, encouraging me to move forward and not stand idle. She was obviously forcing herself to keep going. I started to say something but ended up doing as she said. Right now, our top priority was to attend to what we were here for.

This shrine.

It had something.

A *something* that messed with Kanbaru's body.

It was originally a job from Oshino.

And Oshino would never give us a simple job.

"…Sengoku!"

As soon as I spotted a girl long sleeves, long pants, hat pulled far down, bag around her waist crouching in front of a large rock across the grounds, my reaction was to shout her name. So much for bringing Kanbaru all the way here.

But I couldn't stop myself from shouting.

In Sengoku's left hand, fingers pinched around the neck, was a snake.

In Sengoku's right hand, a chisel.

Pressed against the rock

The snake was still alive.

However it was about to get killed any moment now.

"Stop it, Sengoku!"

"Ah…"

Sengoku□looked at me.

Using the chisel to push the brim of her cap, worn low over her eyes, back up.

Nadeko Sengoku□slowly looked at me.

“Big Brother Koyomi…”

You.

You’d still call me that□

The thought ran through my head as if I were some dark hero who once walked the line until a lapse in judgment derailed him, who, after battling through trials and hardships that you do not relate or sit through without tears, now sat among the top echelons of a shadowy organization and committed an endless chain of unspeakable, unwatchable atrocities, in the midst of which a comrade from bygone days while he was still on the side of justice appears and calls him, by his old name.

“A *Jagirinawa.*”

After pondering for a while, so began Oshino in a frightfully weighty voice, almost as if he detested the name. He tended to speak in a flippant, or even snide way, and this wasn’t a tone you often heard him take.

“The only thing it could be is a Jagirinawa. That’s all it could be, and I can state that for a fact. Though it’s sometimes called a *jakiri,* a *janawa,* a *hebikiri-nawa* snake cutting, snake rope, snake-cutting rope or even just *kuchi-nawa.*”

“A ‘mouth rope’? So just one way to say ‘snake’?”

“Right. Snake,” Oshino repeated.

Snake.

The general term for reptiles in Class Reptilia, Order Squamata, Suborder Serpentes.

Noted for their long, thin, cylindrical bodies covered in scales.

They have hundreds of vertebrae and are able to squirm about freely.

So it went demon, cat, crab, snail, monkey and now snake.

Putting aside the demon as a special case snakes felt like they had the worst reputation of the bunch. They felt like such an ominous symbol. Cats, crabs, snails, and monkeys had nothing on them when it came to spookiness.

Ha hah, Oshino laughed as always in his falsely carefree way, forcing himself to ditch the gloomy tone.

“Well—you’re not wrong to have that impression, Araragi. Since long ago, snakes have been seen as *that sort of thing.* There are a ton of snake-related aberrations, after all. They’re carnivores, I guess, and we do have sayings like ‘a snake in the grass.’ Plus, some of them have lethal poisons…so I suppose you can’t blame people for feeling that way. In the way of venomous snakes, here in Japan we have pit vipers, tiger keelbacks, habus. But then on the other hand, some see snakes as holy, or at least there’s a tradition of worshiping serpent gods—it’s common to nearly every region in the world. A symbol both holy and wicked—that’s the snake.”

“And that shrine—it was for worshiping a snake god too, wasn’t it?”

“Huh? Wait, why do you know that? I kept it a secret from you. Oh, I see. Missy class president told you.”

“…How’d you figure that out?”

“Well, she’s the only one around you who’d know—ha hah, maybe I should have given the talisman job to her? You manage to reel in trouble no matter where you go. Missy class president seems like she has a better head on her shoulders.”

“She—already finished repaying you, remember?”

“Did she now,” Oshino played dumb. It was the kind of reaction I’d come to expect from him.

“Still,” I said, “snakes just feel evil to me. I don’t really get people worshiping some serpent god. The only snake I can think of that doesn’t seem evil is maybe the *tsuchinoko.*”

“Ah, yes. Now that takes me back. I once did everything I could to find one of those damned things hoping to collect a reward. Never caught any, though.”

“I don’t know about an expert going for that. Plus, you couldn’t even find any… Oh, how about that thing, isn’t it an aberration? The *ouroboros* or whatever? The circular one that’s eating its own tail…”

“Oh, that. If you’re going to bring that up, it’s not quite a snake eating its own tail, but some snakes eat other snakes. The king cobra, I think? It’s quite a sight to see photos of a snake swallowing its own kind.”

“Huh… Well, personally, I find snakes scary, not on some rational but instinctual level. Just looking at one stops me in my tracks.”

“Land-based creatures shaped like that are rare, I suppose. It’s like watching a fish swim on land. That certainly qualifies as unique, so I guess it’s only natural for people to see them as bizarre. Like, don’t you respect the first person who ever ate a sea cucumber? Ha hah. And on top of that, snakes have extraordinary vitality. You can try and try, but it takes a lot to kill one□you know? You hear about ‘half-dead’ snakes, but what that really tells you is just how many hit points those things have. For something of that size, it’s off the charts, huh? It’s important to know that snakes aren’t considered pests to humans, though. You must’ve heard of snake wine, right?”

“I’ve never had any, of course.”

“Then what about eating one? I’ve had sea snake paired with snake wine in Okinawa. They say eating snake is good for longevity.”

“I don’t really see myself ever eating snake… But I suppose it doesn’t seem as bad as a sea cucumber.”

“You’re so narrow-minded. Or rather, you’re so gutless, balking at a mere snake. Over on the mainland, there are regions where they eat woofy-woofs, okay?”

“I don’t have any intention of repudiating anyone’s food culture, but could you at least not say ‘woofy-woof’ when you’re talking about eating them?”

Another one of these conversations with Oshino.

It was that, yes.

However his expression was still vaguely dark or so it seemed. Maybe it was just my imagination.

The abandoned ruins of a defunct cram school.

The fourth floor.

There I stood facing an eccentric man with an unlit cigarette in his mouth, a frivolous Hawaiian-shirted bastard to whom I owed my gratitude Mèmè Oshino.

I was alone.

I’d asked Suruga Kanbaru and Nadeko Sengoku to stand by and wait. If you’re wondering where they were in the Araragi family home, sitting in my room. Putting aside my parents, my two little sisters were definitely inclined to enter my room without asking, but with the door locked, it was most likely fine for a few hours… I had to admit that some part of me did feel it was dangerous to leave Suruga Kanbaru, with her personality, not to mention her Sapphic bent, under the same roof as Sengoku and my little sisters without any supervision, but well, I just had to trust my junior.

And.

Above all I had a reason to avoid bringing Kanbaru and Sengoku here. A reason I didn’t want to bring them along to meet Oshino

Afterwards.

Kanbaru and I brought Sengoku along with us and headed to my

home. I had Sengoku sit on the back seat of my bike. Kanbaru ran alongside us without breaking a sweat. As I'd half-expected, Kanbaru's condition returned to normal as soon as we climbed down the mountain. That bit the day before about her feeling better after eating lunch seemed to be a misunderstanding on my part.

Luckily, no one was home.

Both of my little sisters looked to be out (there were signs that they had come home once). Since deceiving their eyes would have been the trickiest part of slipping into my home, for which I hadn't devised any concrete plan coming back, my reaction was one of honest relief. My youngest sister, in particular… If she didn't remember her friend from grade school offhand, seeing her in person would do it. My sister would certainly wonder what was going on if her brother came home with an old pal of hers.

We went straight to my room.

"Big Brother Koyomi…" muttered Sengoku in a vanishing voice. Her face was cast down, and I barely heard her. "You…changed rooms."

"Yeah. I'm in my own room now. Both of my little sisters are still in that room, though… I think they'll come back after a while. Do you want to see them?"

No, Sengoku shook her head listlessly.

Her voice was muted□and so were her reactions.

It made her body seem somehow smaller.

She should have had six years of growth and development□yet she seemed far smaller than when we'd played before, relatively speaking, of course. Maybe it was only because I'd also seen six years of growth□

For some reason, I fell silent.

Then□

“Huh. So this is my senior’s room,” Kanbaru said in her plucky voice, smashing through the mood before it could grow awkward. She took a look around. “It’s a lot tidier than I expected.”

“Sure, compared to your room…”

“Heheheh. This is my first time in a boy’s room.”

“Oh…”

I realized as soon as she said it.

Come to think of it, this was also my first time having a girl who wasn’t family in my room. Even Senjogahara had yet to visit my house. Gauchely inviting a girl into your room was a standard rite of passage for a teenager, but I’d let in my girlfriend’s junior prior to my girlfriend… Was this okay? First a date, and now this… But fine, my little sister’s old friend was with us too□and it was an emergency.

Sengoku had told us at the shrine.

In her tiny little voice.

I’ll tell you why□so take me somewhere indoors where people won’t see us.

Why.

Why what?

Why□she killed those snakes.

Why she sliced them up.

The first place that came to mind was Kanbaru’s home, but I shot the idea down internally before she could suggest it. Because Kanbaru’s room was so messy I’d call it lawless terrain, as hinted above□no, I’d go so far as to call it a warzone. I couldn’t show that kind of room to an

innocent middle schooler. That left my home as the only option. And anyway, Sengoku would probably feel anxious if we took her somewhere completely new. My home was a place where she'd played more than a few times in the past.

"Okay then, why don't we look around for some dirty books?"

"That's what guys do when they go to their male friends' rooms! Just sit over there!"

"I'd find it worthwhile to know your tastes."

"Not only do I not find it worthwhile, I find it actively harmful!"

"Ah, so you admit owning books that are harmful to minors…"

"Says the living harmful book! Take your pick, Kanbaru, sit down or jump out of that window!"

"I'm just kidding, of course. I looked into your tastes long ago, when I was still stalking you. I know every dirty book you've bought lately."

"What?! No way! I was certain no one else was in the store! I made sure!"

"Your tastes are quite out there, aren't they."

"You're down to one option, jump out that window!"

"I'm sure most girls would, faced with that kind of fetish. Heh, but that's like child's play for me, I could withstand it."

"She's proud of it!"

When I looked.

Sengoku was snickering but trying to hide it.

She seemed tickled by our exchange.

Guh. I was embarrassed.

I'd been wondering the whole time on the way back: how friendly

should I be acting with this old acquaintance of mine?

Not to mention Sengoku was quiet, if anything.

She seldom spoke, and only ever did so shyly.

Since Shinobu, Oshino, Hanekawa, Senjogahara, Hachikuji, and Kanbaru were all voluble and garrulous despite their various inclinations (Shinobu: rampant arrogance, Oshino: frivolous sarcasm, Hanekawa: moralizing instruction, Senjogahara: bitter abuse, Hachikuji: two-faced politeness, Kanbaru: fawning flattery), dealing with this new silent character was refreshing. Of course, Shinobu had grown taciturn after becoming a child…

Was Sengoku quiet now just as she had been as a child? Yes, it did feel like she always had her head down but honestly, I couldn't recall the details vividly.

I couldn't remember.

She was introverted, spoke little, and always faced down

But.

She seemed to have remembered me.

Big Brother Koyomi.

Yes, Nadeko Sengoku once referred to me in that manner. As for what I'd called her well, I'd forgotten. Maybe Nadeko, maybe Nadeshiko. Either way, I couldn't call her that anymore.

Sengoku was Sengoku.

"Big Brother…and Miss Kanbaru," Sengoku said at last, quietly of course. "Could you…please turn away for a moment?"

"……"

We silently did as she said.

We turned our backs on Sengoku and faced the wall.

While I may have told Kanbaru to jump out of the window, I felt relieved that she was with me after all. In fact, after I called out to Sengoku at the shrine, I was at a loss as she stood there stiffly, and it was Kanbaru who singlehandedly pulled off the feat of getting her to open up. Seducing any younger girl within ten seconds had been no idle boast. I was willing to admit that Big Brother Koyomi alone would have been useless. I'd have fretted miserably and that would have been it. Looking back on it, Sengoku hadn't just frozen in place—her shoulders slumping as if the world were coming to an end, she'd gone completely blank. *Drawing her back out* would have been nigh impossible with my meager skills.

"My dear senior," Kanbaru whispered as we looked at the same wall. She seemed to be hushing her voice so that Sengoku wouldn't hear, and I replied likewise.

"What is it?"

"You might not welcome it, but my plan is to start livening things up."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you may have already noticed—but that girl, Sengoku, seems to be quite emotionally unstable. I've seen a lot of girls like her, both older and younger than me. She's a serious case. The slightest shock could drive her to self-harm."

"Self-harm…"

Those chisels.

I'd forgotten—to take them from her.

They were inside the bag around her waist.

Everything from a triangular blade to a cutting blade, a full set of five.

It didn't sound exaggerated.

In fact.

If Kanbaru hadn't intervened exactly when she did after I yelled Sengoku's name□that totally *could have been.*

Even I could tell.

"You're a kind person," Kanbaru murmured, "so it might be hard for you to act merry when someone's feeling down, but synching with her depressed state would only make things worse here. I wouldn't say it's like Maxwell's demon, but I need to lift Sengoku's spirit right now."

"…Huh."

So was that the reason for the earlier talk about dirty books? You know, it seemed I had underestimated Kanbaru. I'd wondered if she was just obtuse when she'd said that, but my judgment had been too superficial. Suruga Kanbaru gave more thought to her actions than I knew.

"Okay, then," I said. "If that's how it is, go wild. I'll follow along."

"Yes. I might get carried away and assault you, but I'd like your generosity to extend to that possibility, too."

"I can't be 'generous' about that! How exactly were you planning to liven things up?" I managed to pull off the impressive feat of yelling in a whisper. "Ack, now I'm starting to feel bummed out, too… The slightest shock could drive me to self-harm."

"There's no need for despair. You know what they say. Though it may be winter, the ice age isn't far behind, and night is always followed by a century of darkness."

“No one says that! What would those sayings even mean?!”

“No matter how bad things may seem now, it’s as easy as it’s ever going to be.”

“What a seemingly positive but horribly pessimistic message!”

“There is no rain that doesn’t turn to a flood.”

“Yes, there is! It rains without turning into a flood all the time!”

“Heheheh. See? Now you sound positive again.”

“Agh! You tricked me!”

I suddenly heard a stifled laugh from behind me.

Like someone was struggling to keep quiet.

It was Sengoku.

It seemed she just barely heard us.

If that was Kanbaru’s plan all along□

She really was something.

“It’s okay now. Please turn back around,” Sengoku said.

When I did, I saw Nadeko Sengoku fully in the nude□standing straight on the bed as she looked down in embarrassment.

No□she wasn’t completely nude.

She had taken her hat off, naturally, and even her socks, but was still wearing volleyball shorts. Other than that□there wasn’t a thread left on her body. Though she did use the palms of her hands to hide her modest breasts.

“…Wait, volleyball shorts?”

Huh?

Just as I’d guessed, Sengoku attended the same middle school that I graduated from, but hadn’t they retired volleyball shorts and introduced baggier athletic shorts by the time I started there?

“Ah well,” Kanbaru said, “I just ‘happened’ to be carrying those around and lent them to her.”

“I see. You just ‘happened’ to be carrying around volleyball shorts.”

“They’re a simple and tasteful part of a young lady’s life.”

“No, that’d be a sick and twisted plot on a young lady’s life.”

“I had them ready in case something like this came to pass.”

“What did you think was coming to pass? What exactly did you think I wanted when I summoned you today? You’re making me doubt my own credibility. And where did you even get a pair of those things, anyway? If this were an old-timey manga, that’s the kind of item that would prompt lines like, ‘Impossible! That tribe was supposed to have been wiped out long ago!’”

“Yup. While I may not look like it, I have excellent foresight. I saw that the culture would some day be wiped out and decided to conserve a hundred and fifty pairs of them beforehand.”

“Isn’t that over-hunting, rather than conserving?”

Hadn’t she made them go extinct, to be honest?

“……”

A high school boy and a high school girl having a lively and jovial discussion about volleyball shorts while a nearly naked middle school girl stood there on a bed. An outside viewer might see it as a fairly serious case of bullying.

Sengoku’s bangs, hidden earlier by her hat, were longer than I expected, covering her eyes. Or maybe she was doing it on purpose out of embarrassment. The cuticles of her lustrous black hair shone. It seemed she’d hidden her clothes under my comforter after taking them

off. The fact that she was wearing those shorts as per Kanbaru's ministrations and that she'd taken even her bra off suggested that displaying her underwear was more embarrassing than baring her skin for this old female acquaintance of mine. She undoubtedly looked more provocative than she intended, there in nothing but volleyball shorts, but I didn't understand middle school girls' sensibilities…

But.

Unfortunately—I guess you might say?

Sex appeal had nothing to do with this situation.

"What is…that?"

It had taken me a while, but the surprised words found their way out of my mouth—when I saw Nadeko Sengoku's skin.

Her skin—was covered in traces of scales.

From the toes of her two feet up to her collarbones.

Clear traces of scales—on every inch of her body.

For a moment I wondered if scales had grown directly on her body, but I looked closer to realize that wasn't the case. The scales were imprinted onto her body, like with a woodblock print—pressed onto her skin as it were.

"Reminds me of rope bondage marks," Kanbaru said.

Indeed, there did seem to be signs of internal bleeding here and there on her body, and the painful-looking markings made it look like she had been tied up—asking Kanbaru why she had such intimate knowledge of rope bondage marks would only complicate things, so I decided to let it slide for the time being.

No—maybe not rope bondage marks as much as…

Something going from her toes up through her legs all the way to her torso□

It was as if something was gripped around her.

Something we couldn't see.

Traces of scales, on every inch of her body.

Gripped around her.

Gripping□possessing her.

The only parts of her body without those marks were her arms, as well as her head from the neck up. There was no need to go the extra step of having her show us her hips and lower abdomen, now hidden by those volleyball shorts.

Scales.

So if they were scales□fish?

No, these weren't fish scales, but a reptile's□

A snake.

Snake…*serpent.*

"Big Brother?" Sengoku said.

Her voice still vanishingly small.

Her voice shaking.

"You're a grownup already…so you aren't having any dirty thoughts seeing me naked, are you?"

"Huh? O-Oh. No way. Right, Kanbaru?"

"Yes? Umm…I…guess?"

"Hey, play along! Where'd all that loyalty of yours go?!"

"Sengoku, it might do you good going forward to know that some people think dirty thoughts when they see little girls nude precisely because they're adults."

“You’ve betrayed me! And we’d gotten along so well until now!”

“I don’t know, though. I think in this case, it only makes you more suspect as a man if you show no interest whatsoever in seeing her naked, or maybe, it’s just rude to her?”

Kanbaru seemed fairly solemn as she said this to me.

Thinking about it, I had to admit she was right.

While the situation was anything but sexual, and while there were snake scales imprinted along her entire body, it still felt impolite to see a girl naked and not feel a thing. I seemed to recall Senjogahara saying that providing some feedback was just good manners.

I turned to face Sengoku.

I spoke to her in the most serious voice I could manage.

“Let me correct myself. I do have a few little dirty thoughts seeing you nude, Sengoku.”

“……urr.” Sengoku’s shoulders began to shake, as though she were trying to stifle her anguish. “Uh, urrr…uurk.”

Tears began to stream from her eyes□and she began to cry.

“Hey, Kanbaru! I’ve made a middle school girl cry because I took your advice! A middle school girl! Do you understand? It’s all over for me! How are you going to make this right?!”

“No one could have guessed that you’d put it so directly…”

Kanbaru was looking at me, appalled.

It didn’t seem like she’d been trying to trick me.

“I,” Sengoku said, crouching down on my bed□her head bowed, mumbling so quietly it was barely audible□

And yet.

The words were certain.

“I hate having this body.”

“…Sengoku.”

“I hate it… Save me, Big Brother Koyomi,” she said in a tearful voice.

And then□

An hour later.

I was visiting a derelict building inhabited by Oshino and Shinobu that once housed a cram school with only a day separating me from my last visit on Saturday.

“You’re late. I’ve been waiting,” Oshino greeted me in his arrogant, all-knowing tone.

Mèmè Oshino.

An expert on the subject of aberrations.

A specialist, an authority.

The man who lifted me from the veil of darkness I found myself under during spring break after being attacked by a vampire and getting turned into one myself in this day and age□my savior.

A Hawaiian-shirted dude, age unknown.

An awful role model with no fixed address who went from journey to journey.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, when she was charmed by a cat.

Hitagi Senjogahara, when she encountered a crab.

Mayoi Hachikuji, when she got lost with a snail.

Suruga Kanbaru, when she wished to a monkey.

All of them□received help from Oshino.

I don’t know if I’ll ever fully repay the favor□but to be frank, if he weren’t my savior, I wouldn’t want to get to know his type very well. By no means.

He had an awful personality. He was no font of good will. He was like an avatar of caprice. While I'd known him for some time since spring break, I still couldn't understand large swaths of his personality.

He sat cross-legged on top of a makeshift bed he had fashioned by tying together, with plastic rope, a number of desks that kids must have once used to study away. After I'd explained all of the above, Oshino said in a tormented voice almost as if he detested the name□

"A *Jagirinawa.*"

"A Jagirinawa, huh… Never heard of that one."

"It's pretty famous. I think it's a form of serpent shamanism."

"Serpent shaman? Not serpent-bearer?"

"Serpent-bearers are from Greek mythology. Serpent shamanism is domestic. You know, like serpent-god mediums… I guess there isn't much point in talking to you about that. Still, a Jagirinawa… Hmm. So would that make this girl…your junior?"

"It doesn't really feel like it because of how much younger she is. So□she's my little sister's friend."

"A-ha. So she's like a little sister to you."

"Don't go around assigning my acquaintances to whatever position."

"She does call you her big brother."

"……"

I'd told him too much.

What an honest chump.

It was like I couldn't tell a lie…

No, I was just bad at hiding things.

“And that ‘big brother’ of days gone by,” Oshino added, “is now ‘li’l Ragiko’… Time really does fly like an arrow.”

“I don’t get called that! That was just a joke Kanbaru made!”

“I think it suits you well, though.”

“Forget about it!”

“You know, I’ve been calling those girls ‘li’l missy’ tsundere and ‘li’l missy’ class president all this time, while you are simply Araragi, and I was beginning to feel prejudiced. From now on, I’ll be more impartial and call you li’l Ragiko.”

“Please, don’t! I’m begging you!”

“It does feel like it could stick.”

After we went back and forth like that for a bit, Oshino got back on track.

“At any rate. You managed to finish your job on time regardless. Good work, Araragi.”

“Oh… Yeah, I guess.” I’d never expected to be thanked by Oshino. I was so taken aback that my reaction must have seemed a little odd.

“I have to say, I couldn’t ever have done it myself. Give my thanks to that missy, too. Er, uh□”

Oshino started to think.

He must have meant Kanbaru, but… Ah, he wasn’t sure what to call her. That made me realize he hadn’t settled on a tag for her yet. Hanekawa was li’l missy class president, Senjogahara was li’l missy tsundere, and Hachikuji was li’l lost girl… So Kanbaru would be, say, li’l miss sporty?

“That li’l miss pervy.”

"……"

It seemed that Oshino saw Kanbaru more as a pervy character than as an athlete.

Not that I didn't see where he was coming from.

I thought he'd hit the mark, myself.

"Couldn't you at least draw the line at something like 'li'l miss sapphy'? She is, despite it all, a girl…"

"Huh? You think so? Okay, I'd be fine with that. Anyway□both you and her are now even with me. Let her know that."

"Even? So□we don't owe you anything?"

"Right."

"There's something I wanted to ask you just to be sure, Oshino□may I?"

"What is it?"

"It seemed like the moment we entered those shrine grounds, Kanbaru suddenly started feeling sick… Is that relevant?"

I'd had Kanbaru wait at home because I wanted to ask Oshino the question when she wasn't around.

Hmm, Oshino said with a sidelong glance.

"Araragi□what about you?"

"Huh?"

"How did you feel? Did you get sick or anything?"

"No□I was fine."

"I see. Well, you'd given little Shinobu your blood the day before□so I guess it makes sense. It means you were lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Remember what I just told you? It isn't something I could have

ever done. That shrine used to be the center of this town."

"The center? Really? If anything, I'd say it's placed□"

"Not in terms of location. Well, it stopped being used long ago. There shouldn't be anything to the place nowadays, seeing how everyone has forgotten about it, but□Shinobu."

"Shinobu? What about her?"

"You know how she wandered into this town□she's a legendary vampire from a noble bloodline. A vampire, the king of aberrations. I guess you could say her influence activated the spot. *Bad things□were starting to gather there.*"

"There? You mean□at that shrine?"

That shrine□even the gods seemed not to visit.

Bad things.

"Yep. You could say it had become like an air pocket, or maybe a kind of hangout□places like that exist, centers. Part of why I stayed here even after Shinobu's case ended was to find that hangout□though my main goal, of course, was to collect aberrations. Ha hah. I got to meet missy class president and missy tsundere thanks to it, so I will say I had my fun."

"When you say *bad things*□what exactly do you mean?"

"*Various things.* It's not something I can put concisely…or rather, these *things* don't have names yet. You couldn't even call them aberrations at this point."

A haunt frequented by the bizarre.

That□is what it had become.

What gathered there□weren't humans.

The literally bizarre had.

“And Kanbaru started feeling sick because of that?” I asked.

“That’s right. Li’l miss sapphy’s left arm is still a monkey’s so it’s easier for her to be affected by *bad things*. It’s the same for you, but as aberrations, there’s an overwhelming difference in rank between her monkey and Shinobu. It means that while she’s lost her resistance against those kinds of phenomena, you’ve actually built up a decent resistance to *bad things*.”

“…Did you know all along, Oshino? That Kanbaru would feel *that way*?”

“Don’t glare at me. You’re always so spirited, Araragi, something good happen to you? It’s not like li’l miss sapphy suffered anything in particular. And she owed me. She wouldn’t be paying me back unless she went through a few struggles. Her, especially. Don’t you agree?”

“……”

He may have been right.

It was just that I couldn’t see it in such a strict light. Maybe that suffering was something Kanbaru needed to experience. At least, I couldn’t see her complaining to Oshino even if she found out. That was the kind of person she was.

“Well, the rest is up to her now,” Oshino said. “The fate of that left arm is her problem. If she can make it to twenty without incident she’ll be freed from her aberration.”

“That’d be nice.”

“Hm. You’re a good person, Araragi. As usual…”

“What’s that supposed to mean? It sounds like you’re trying to imply something.”

“Not really. I was just wondering if you weren’t a little jealous. Of

her going back from fellow non-human to human again."

"…Not really. I've already made peace with myself when it comes to my body. It's all sorted and settled, so stop trying to stir up trouble by saying those kinds of things. Don't say anything unnecessary to Kanbaru, either. I don't want her to feel like she owes me anything."

"You're right, I'm sorry. You stuck the talisman on the door of the main hall, right? That's a little bit of a lazy job, but it's fine. It should scatter those *bad things* to some degree."

"To some degree?"

"A talisman placed by an amateur isn't going to change things that dramatically. In fact, it'd be an issue if they did. We only need to nudge the natural flow of things or else who knows what could happen elsewhere. In that sense, the choice to do a half-assed job by placing it on the door might not have been a bad choice at all."

"…Why couldn't you do it? Whether it's aberrations or whatever *bad things* that precede them that's your field of expertise, isn't it? Or is this a case of you forcing yourself to come up with a job so that Kanbaru could pay off her debt to you?"

"I won't say that wasn't a factor, but it really would've been hard for me. Just look at me, I'm as thin and wimpy as I seem. I don't have the stamina to climb up a mountain."

"That's not the line of a wanderer going from journey to journey."

"Ha hah. Was I being transparent? Well, yes, that was a joke. Physical stamina isn't the issue it's more of a mental thing. Just like what happened to you and li'l miss sapphy *because you're aberrations* I stimulate those *bad things* needlessly *because I'm an expert.* I'd have no choice but to do something if they decided to attack me, and in that

case, I'd end up turning that hangout into a perfect vacuum. There's no telling what might stream into it next—worst case, we'd have another Shinobu."

"I don't really get it…but is it like how humans shouldn't affect the balance of the natural world just to make things more convenient for us? Sending someone like me or Kanbaru instead of the too-powerful Oshino going there helped to keep them calm?"

"Yeah, something like that," he brushed me off.

The truth must have been a bit more complicated—or maybe it was something else entirely—but there didn't seem to be any point in delving into the matter.

Kanbaru and Oshino were even now.

Just as long as that much was clear.

"Not just her, you know," Oshino said breezily. "Your debts with me are all settled now, too."

"…Huh?" I couldn't hide my surprise. Those didn't seem like words he would ever speak. "I owed you…five million yen."

"In cash terms, yes. That was how much your job this time was worth, though. You essentially managed to prevent the Great Yokai War from taking place."

"I-It was that big of a deal?"

I wished he would've told me earlier.

But when I thought about it, the job was big enough to instantly cancel out Kanbaru's bill despite her headache of a case—so I should have expected him to deduct a suitably sizable chunk of my debts, too. Not taking yourself into account sounded beautiful, but in reality it just made you feel like an idiot…

“We’re all settled,” Oshino assured, “but I almost feel like I owe you a little bit of change. Whatever. Let’s talk about that girl—the missy who’s like your little sister. You’re making this sound like a pretty urgent matter, after all.”

“Am I?”

“It’s only her arms and neck and head that’s unaffected, right? Ouch. Once the Jagirinawa comes up to her face, that’s it. Araragi. The Jagirinawa is *an aberration that kills people.* I need you to understand that. This case—is a rather serious one.”

“……”

I’d thought—that might be so. Those scale marks had a sinister air. But it felt so much more grave coming from an expert’s mouth.

It wasn’t a deathly aberration.

It was a—killing aberration.

“Snake venom can kill humans—they say. Neurotoxins, hemotoxins, cardiotoxins, the whole gamut. If you don’t go at it with a serum, you can get pulled into it. Snakes—are tricky, you see.”

Though, surprisingly enough, the poisonous ones tend to taste better—Oshino added.

“Oshino… Exactly what kind of aberration is the Jagirinawa?”

“Before I let you know, tell me the title of the book missy was reading in the bookstore aisle. You said to miss sapphy that you’d tell her later, but you never did, did you? What book was it? Looking at it made you feel certain that there was *something about that girl.*”

“Oh… Well, it’s exactly what you’d expect. A twelve-thousand-yen hardcover called *A Complete Collection of Snake Curses.*”

“…The title makes it sound like a recent book. Not from before the

war or the Edo period.”

“Yeah. The cover looked brand-new, too.”

But that title was more than enough to make me think of the dead snakes, chopped into five, that I’d seen the day before. Of course, as soon as I witnessed the carcasses on Sunday, I vaguely suspected Sengoku, whom we’d just passed on the stairs…but it was when I saw the book’s title that my suspicion turned into certainty.

Long sleeves, long pants.

But her long pants may not have been for entering the mountains, and more a way to hide the scale marks imprinted on her legs.

In fact, that had to be it.

This body.

I hate having this body she’d said.

Kanbaru must have understood the way Sengoku felt. The bandage wrapped around her left arm was there to hide her monkey’s arm. When I thought about it, that was on a different level from me growing out my hair in the back to hide my bite marks. And come to think of it, when Kanbaru wanted to show me what lay under the bandages, she’d invited me to her house not wanting anyone else to see.

In that sense, those two faced similar circumstances.

Those two.

What could they be talking about right now?

……

Miss sapphy, you better not be seducing her.

I’m trusting you… I’m trusting you, all right?

“My limited knowledge doesn’t cover what kind of book that is,” Oshino admitted, “but it must include information on the Jagirinawa.

Serpent shamanism is basically synonymous with snake curses, after all…”

“So are serpent shamans like witch doctors or something?”

“Well, yes. These aren’t naturally occurring aberrations—they’re commanded by someone’s clear, or explicit, malice… Well, it doesn’t necessarily have to be malice, but siccing the Jagirinawa on someone sounds like nothing else.”

“Oh…I heard that, too.”

“Hm? You did?”

“Well, yeah.”

Sengoku didn’t give me a name.

It was partly my fault because I didn’t feel like grilling an introvert like her—but Sengoku stubbornly refused to give up a name.

The culprit’s name.

But—she did tell me it was someone in her class.

A friend—from her class.

What with a curse placed on her, I thought “former friend” was more like it.

I told Oshino, “It’s a middle schooler’s idea of a charm—some sort of fad, apparently. These charms go a little deep into the occult… Most are complete whiffs, of course, but I guess you could say Sengoku is the unlucky exception.”

“Unlucky, huh?” Oshino echoed suggestively. “Charms and curses. I suppose the two are similar. But Araragi, from what you’re saying, the perpetrator is a rank amateur, a middle schooler… The Jagirinawa isn’t supposed to be the kind of aberration that a beginner can handle.”

“Like a broken clock getting the time right, couldn’t it have been a fluke?”

“Could it? Hmm. Why did this classmate want to curse missy to begin with?”

“According to the bits and pieces I gathered from her, it was actually over love. Someone being head over heels. This friend had a boy she liked, and that boy told Sengoku he loved her, but not knowing any of that, Sengoku turned him down□earning her resentment.”

“Hm. How typical.”

“Well, this is a middle-school romance we’re talking about.” Not that the views of someone who’d never dated a girl until his last year of high school counted for much.

“If she started dating him without knowing, that’s one thing,” commented Oshino, “but you’d think turning him down wouldn’t have mattered.”

“It’s about feelings, I guess. Maybe when Sengoku turned him down, the other girl resented something precious to her getting dissed?” I made it sound like my interpretation, but it was Kanbaru’s take. How could I hope to understand the mentality of a middle school girl? If Kanbaru thought so, I could only suppose that she was right.

“Huh. Well, who cares about the reason. People don’t need reasons to hate each other. So things soured□and ended with a curse. Ah, how fleeting friendship is. That’s why I don’t make friends.”

“…Is that so.” I wanted to retort to that, but if I tried to quip at everything Oshino said, our conversation would last through the night, and then some… I needed to control myself. I couldn’t leave those two

waiting forever. “Sengoku said she was reading *A Complete Collection of Snake Curses* because she wanted to figure out how to get rid of hers. Today wasn’t the first time she read that book, either. She’d been going back to it over and over for a while now, almost every day, reading, then reading some more, and consulting it□to try every curse removal, ritual purification, exorcism, and the like by herself.”

That’s what those were.

The sliced snakes.

It wasn’t like a ritual□a ritual was precisely what it was. Using a chisel struck me as grotesque at first, but it seemed that those were the only bladed objects Sengoku owned. Maybe the most readily accessible edged tools for a middle school girl was in fact her chisel set.

“Removing a snake curse by killing snakes□the idea smells fishy to me,” I continued. “And actually, she said her condition started to get worse when she started killing snakes like that□”

“No, Araragi. Repelling a Jagirinawa by cutting up snakes isn’t wrong. Actually, it’s the right and proper thing to do. The method was probably listed in the Jagirinawa section of the so-called *Complete Collection*… But she’s quite the brave young lady, isn’t she? Catching snakes on her own and killing them. It’s wonderful. You keep describing her as docile and quiet, but I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, this is the countryside at the end of the day. You can’t let yourself be surprised by a girl who picks up snakes with her bare hands.”

“That’s hard for me to accept, as a city boy.”

“What about you makes you a city boy, exactly?”

Well.

You could say Sengoku had been pushed to that point by the curse by the Jagirinawa.

She'd cried.

There was nothing brave about her.

If anything, she was delicate. Too delicate.

"It's not that killing snakes will remove a snake curse, Araragi what's important here is the *cutting up* of snakes. Here, the snakes are a metaphor for rope. Jagirinawa *nawa,* rope. No matter how tightly you're bound, cut the rope and you'll be free."

"Bound…"

Rope bondage marks.

She was being bound by a snake.

A rope, huh?

Oshino went on. "There's a saying that once you're bitten by a snake, you'll jump at the sight of a rope, and in this case, snake equals rope. What makes a rope a rope is that it can be cut."

"…That doesn't seem to make sense, though. Sengoku said she's already killed more than ten snakes at that shrine. But far from going away…"

The curse was only getting worse.

The more snakes she killed, the faster the scales *climbed up rolling* from her toes that's what she told me. It was proof that the curse was progressing.

"Well, like I always say," reminded Oshino, "when it comes to these things the process matters. This missy who's like your little sister is a complete, rank amateur right? In general, it's harder to remove a curse

than to place one, so of course her condition is going to get worse if she goes by her half-knowledge. If you kill snakes while a snake is possessing you, of course you're going to make it mad. You're right in that regard, Araragi."

"……"

"But this conversation is helping me see why a curse placed by another complete amateur of a middle school girl has been so successful. My initial assumption was that hell has no fury like a woman scorned, but I guess I missed the mark. It's bad luck."

"What do you mean?"

"Missy probably learned that a curse had been placed on her before it ever began to work. Judging by the fact that she knows exactly who it was, she must have heard it straight from the girl. 'Damn you, I placed a curse on you!' or something. Missy panicked, went to the bookstore to find out how to get rid of it, and climbed up a mountain that's known for having a lot of snakes so she could cut 'em up. I guess she found the shrine by accident? Well, maybe she knew about it in advance. Then, she got busy killing those snakes."

"What about that is 'bad luck'?"

"The spot. Remember what I said? *An air pocket, a hangout*"

"Oh."

A place where bad things gathered.

Those *bad things* that Shinobu's presence had activated.

"And that strengthened the curse?" I asked.

"Not strengthened, most likely it wouldn't have triggered at all if not for that spot. Unlike you and miss sapphy, her body must be a

regular human one—so while she probably didn't feel unwell, the *bad things* affected her in the form of the Jagirinawa."

She had no way to fight back—no resistance.

A rank amateur.

"So it's like she deepened her own wounds," I said.

"It's like she wounded herself. Although it's a cruel way to put it, nothing would have happened if only she'd done nothing. Actually, the description in this *Complete Collection of Snake Curses* might be half-assed to begin with. I try to refrain from speaking ill of books I haven't read, but it's a strong possibility. On top of it all, you have an amateur edition curse-removal ritual in a spot like that. Those *bad things* must have worked in a *bad direction.*"

"What a quagmire."

"A quagmire, indeed."

Your bad luck—could get that bad?

"I suppose the silver lining for her was being reunited with you right as matters were coming to a head—you do plan on doing something for the girl, right?"

"…Am I wrong to?"

"No, not necessarily. Neither seek nor shun the fight, after all. But it is a little tough for me to understand. I get taking pity on her, but why go so far? Because she's your little sister's old friend? Or because her last name reminds you of your girlfriend's?"

"Huh? Oh, because Sengoku is a 'thousand *koku*' as in how they used to value territories, and Senjogahara means 'battlefield'? Actually, I'd never considered that one. I only realized for the first time now. Well, no—I mean, she's in such distress. Isn't it normal to—want to do

something?”

“What a good person,” Oshino said.

He gave it such an unpleasant ring.

“There’s a book called the *Compilation of Snake Curses* that was put together in mid-Edo—it’s an odd tome containing nothing but snake-related aberrations. That’s where the Jagirinawa first appears in print. With an illustration, to boot.”

“An illustration? What does it look like?”

“*It depicts a man who’s being constricted by a giant snake. The tail’s design resembles a straw rope, while the snake’s head is—in the man’s mouth.* His jaw is open as far as it can go, almost as if he’s a snake—that’s the picture. Snakes can swallow animals as big as chickens whole, after all.”

“Constricted—”

“Gripped. Possessed.”

“……”

“In other words, Araragi. Missy’s body is—*in the grips of such a giant snake as we speak.* A snake is gripping and possessing and constricting her. Tightly—and mercilessly.”

“But…she said it doesn’t hurt.”

“That’s a lie, of course it does. She’s trying to endure the pain. Don’t I keep on telling you that trust is key? You’re dealing with a quiet kid, you need to try to read what’s in her heart—looking into her eyes.”

“Looking—into her eyes.”

That reminded me, when Sengoku said it didn’t hurt, Kanbaru seemed to want to say something… So that’s what it was? She said things that needed to be said—but kept her mouth shut if she only

wanted to say it. That certainly would have been very Kanbaru.

“Wrapping around a prey’s body and pulverizing its bones to make it easier to eat before swallowing it is typical snake behavior. It’s not easy to get a snake to release you once it has you in its grip.”

“I see… Right, it’s an aberration, so it can ignore her clothes.”

Those marks were only on her skin, and she seemed to be able to take off and put on clothes freely, volleyball shorts aside. That had kept me from thinking that an aberration might have Sengoku’s body in its grip, but what did I know—*I just couldn’t see it.*

“A rope—right?” I asked Oshino. “And bound? So those scale marks across her body aren’t traces—at this very moment, an invisible snake is *manifestly gnawing into her.*”

This giant snake, the Jagirinawa, was invisible to my eyes, to Kanbaru’s, and of course to Sengoku’s, so we *only saw through to the effect* that the aberration was having on Sengoku’s skin.

“Even then,” Oshino explained, “I think it’s only because you and miss sapphy are essentially half-human, half-creature that you can see those marks at all. The same goes for missy, who’s in its grip. I’d imagine that anyone other than you three—missy tsundere or missy class president, for example—wouldn’t even see the marks. They might be able to see the internal bleeding, though.”

There was no need for her to hide the marks with long pants.

No reason to be ashamed of her body.

That’s what Oshino said.

But that didn’t seem like the problem to me. Yes, that might be the case, logically speaking—and maybe it was another instance of Sengoku’s bad luck that Kanbaru and I happened to be the ones to see her

body—but didn't it more than qualify as an issue *if she saw herself that way?*

"Maybe," Oshino admitted. "Yes, you might be right."

"That was an awfully quick admission."

"Even I can be honest and upfront at times. I don't have anything better to do right now."

"You can't be honest and upfront if you aren't just chilling?"

"Come to think of it, I get that she dresses in long sleeves and long pants when she goes out, but what's she been doing at school so far? Do the girls at your old middle school not wear skirts as part of their uniforms?"

"Not really, they're more like dresses. Kind of an all-in-one? Have you seen them on your research forays?"

"Ah, yes. So that's your alma mater. Those are cute—but wouldn't they still leave her legs exposed?"

"That's why Sengoku's been taking school off since those marks became visible, though she managed while she could still hide them with socks—well, okay, Oshino, what about this? Is there some way to make the body of this Jagirinawa visible? Would you be able to see it?"

"No way, I'm just a human."

Mr. Expert didn't seem to mind at all that he couldn't.

He was practically shirking his duties with that line.

"And not just me," he said. "In this kind of case, it's basically hard for others to see what the possessed can't see themselves. No matter how much of a former vampire you may be. As a side note, it isn't the person in the Jagirinawa's grip but the one who cast the snake who can see it—and this is an accidental case, so I doubt even she could. This friend

probably hasn't even realized that the curse took. Otherwise, it'd be a huge deal in their class… Well, no, maybe that friend is just keeping quiet about it. That really would be full-blown malice…but I don't think that's what it is. Missy would be long dead if it were. But there's no point in going over all these possibilities. Talk about guesswork. Oh, but one thing□while you may not be able to see it, Araragi, you just might be able to touch it."

"Hm…like you did once?"

"Uhhh, what're you talking about?" Pretty pointlessly in my view, Oshino was playing dumb. "If you can touch it, you should be able to peel it off…but you might not want to. Snakes are savage animals. Do that and I'm sure the Jagirinawa will attack you. And even if you somehow escape it, it'll seek out the classmate who cast the curse next."

"The curse turning on the caster."

"You know what they say□when one is cursed, two holes are dug. This girl must not have meant to kill missy and probably doesn't believe in curses to begin with. I think she honestly intended to just go, 'Damn you, I placed a curse on you!' out of spite. Hmm. I don't like that she decided to get the occult involved over something so petty, though… How's an outsider like me supposed to make a living? This business is bad for me."

"I can't tell if you misspoke there or not."

"Ha hah. Well, I guess it's fine."

With those words, Oshino got off his makeshift bed. He then plodded away and tried to exit the room, so I hastily called out to his back.

"Hey, where are you going?"

“Eh. Wait here a second.”

That was all he said before leaving the classroom for real.

He was a fickle person. Actually, he was just being selfish.

Now what… If I had time, I wanted to check up on Shinobu, but if I missed Oshino in the process, that’d be stupid… Which classroom was Shinobu in, anyway? It was rare for her and Oshino to be in different ones. Had she gotten into another fight with Oshino over some Mister Donuts?

Fine, I would just file a status report.

I pulled out my cell phone and tried calling Kanbaru□Sengoku, by the way, still didn’t have one, in typical fashion for a rural middle schooler. Then again, even if my parents found them, this was Kanbaru so she’d do just fine … As long as they didn’t discover that she was a pretty serious pervert and a real-deal sapphist, Kanbaru was an exemplary young woman who excelled at academics as well as athletics.

But the moment I tried to open my contacts list□

“Thanks for waiting.”

Oshino returned.

That was quick.

So quick that I wondered if he knew what I was about to do.

He really acted like he saw through everything.

“Hm? What’s that modern convenience you have there? Were you about to call someone?”

“Well…I was just thinking of contacting Kanbaru and Sengoku in advance. It seems like this will take more time than I thought.”

“No need to call in that case. I’m already done talking here. Take this.”

From his position at the entryway, Oshino tossed straight at me whatever he was holding in his right hand. The sudden projectile threw me off balance, but I was somehow able to catch the item without dropping it.

It was a traditional amulet.

It was shaped like a standard amulet□but the pouch said nothing.

There were no words indicating if it was for, say, traffic safety or fertility.

A blank design.

“What’s□this?”

“You can purify it with that. The Jagirinawa.”

“……”

“There’s a talisman inside of it. What you might call a protective charm. It’s different from the one I had you place…and the pouch it’s in is nothing, just a sheath. The talisman is a bit of a powerful one, so safety measures are required. Safety measures, or maybe a limiter. Don’t get it wrong, though, it’s not as if all you’re going to have to do is place that talisman on her forehead like she’s a *jiangshi* or something. In fact, don’t ever take that talisman out of its pouch. Like I said, it’s a safety measure, a limiter. There’s no telling what might happen. I’m going to tell you the correct method for this, so do your best to remember for later. I could go out there myself, but it’s probably better if I don’t□as far as building a relationship of trust with the young lady, you and li’l miss sapphy are already set. That claim of being able to seduce younger girls within ten seconds doesn’t sound like false advertising, either. I’m so impressed. I’m so jealous. Ha hah, and while you seem to have forgotten, it seems missy’s memories of you are rather nice ones, no?

She wouldn't be able to strip on a moment's notice in a man's room otherwise, Big Brother Koyomi."

"……"

I didn't know about that, to be honest.

When it came to people who never stopped talking like Senjogahara, Kanbaru, Hanekawa, or Hachikuji, I could make some sort of guess about how they felt—whether those words were frank ones or not—but it was hard to deal with someone who spoke so little. Someone with a shy personality. Who buckled under pressure and cast her eyes downward at the smallest provocation—

When I thought about the situation, it was surprising that this very same girl had flatly turned down a boy. Someone with her personality seemed like the type who couldn't say no and got dragged into being someone's girlfriend… But, once again, I had no right whatsoever to be talking about these affairs of the heart.

"I think it's like how you wouldn't be embarrassed to strip naked in front of a doctor," Oshino said. "That's what a relationship of trust is. Oh, wasn't Asclepius from the constellation Ophiuchus a patron saint of medicine? Another hint, perhaps."

"But, Oshino…is it really okay?"

"Is what okay?"

"For you to be so…quick and simple with a way to purify her. You normally act more pompous, you know? You go into these tiny little details, or you're never really cooperative. I feel like you went easy on your usual mountain of trivia too. Don't tell me you're not being serious about this now that I don't owe you anything."

"Oh, Araragi. You just love nagging me, don't you? You and I know

full well that you'll complain if I do pile on the trivia. I'm starting to think that the real tsundere here is you, not li'l missy tsundere. How so spirited, something good happen to you? I didn't use to say all that to be mean or anything. It was the same for missy class president, missy tsundere, li'l lost girl, miss sapphy, and especially you, Araragi. *Each of you stuck your own neck into an aberration, didn't you*?"

"Well, that's…"

That's.

"If I may," Oshino continued, "all of you were *perpetrators.* Whether or not you meant to be, you were *complicit* with your aberrations. For people who've gotten their hands dirty to wash their feet, a certain process becomes necessary. But it's different in this case, isn't it? *Nadeko Sengoku is clearly nothing more than a poor victim.* She's done nothing wrong. Even the reason the Jagirinawa was set upon her is weak. *For every aberration, there is a reason*—but none of that reason here is missy's doing. Ten snakes, was it? She may have killed them, but even that was her trying to defend herself. She was unlucky, it wasn't her day—that's it. I'm not so unreasonable to hold accountable the victim of someone's malice. What people like that need is to be saved."

"……"

So that's what it was.

Sorry, Oshino, I thought you were acting that way to be mean…

It made sense now… That was why his tone sounded so grave from the moment he first named the Jagirinawa. It didn't have anything to do with the Jagirinawa itself. That was purely Oshino thinking about the victim, Nadeko Sengoku.

"Crimes need to be atoned for, but you can't allow someone to be

judged for a crime they never committed. People in trouble need to be saved—right? Yes, I may not be the nicest guy, but even I have that much kindness for others left in my heart. Though that isn't to say I'm doing this entirely as volunteer work—this is my job."

"Yeah, I figured as much."

"But it's fine. This can be the change left over from the work you and miss sapphy did for me. The missy who's like your little sister doesn't need to do a thing in return."

"…I see."

Yes, there may have been that issue of perpetrator versus victim.

But even then, it felt like he was playing favorites.

Maybe he liked middle schoolers.

"But, Araragi. Let me give you just one warning—when one is cursed, two holes are dug. I know I'm saying it again, but I want you to keep the words close in mind, and I want you to think closely about them."

"Oh… Well, that won't be hard, it's not unheard-of advice. You don't need to do anything special to learn that. I've had plenty of chances to find out what it means that have nothing to do with aberrations."

"I'm sure that's true—but, Araragi. I don't know how you see this, but it's not as if I'm going to be living here forever," Oshino said, his tone staying frivolous. "Eventually I'll be done collecting and researching. After all, you and miss sapphy have solved one of my main concerns, or rather, achieved one of my main goals. I will leave this town some day. And when I do, you're not going to be able to come to me for advice, you know?"

Our debts had been settled, too.

Oshino continued.

“It’s been a while since I first started wandering from place to place, but this is the first time I’ve ever spoken this much with any one person. There is the fact that you’ve gotten yourself involved with one aberration after the next but the thing that’s a little odd about you is that you try to deal with every single one. Once you’ve experienced an aberration, you’re more likely to attract them in the future that much is true, but most people who encountered an aberration will then go out of their way to avoid them.”

“……”

“That’s how things balance themselves out. This relates to what I said about you being a tsundere, but you say all kinds of things about girls, don’t you? That they’re meddling, or that they’re good at looking after others. But all of those traits apply to you, Araragi not that it’s a bad thing. I’m so envious of your personality that I keep saying nasty things to you, but I think you’re good the way you are. But what are you planning to do once I’m gone?”

“Er well.”

Well I hadn’t ever thought about that.

It went without saying that Oshino wouldn’t reside in my town for the rest of his life, it was like a given but the question of what I’d do once he was gone wasn’t one I could answer on the spot.

Did we have to talk about this right now?

Oshino went on. “Aberrations exist as though it’s natural for them to be there they aren’t something you should go out seeking. Do that and of course you might end up as the perp. I think you worry too

much, Araragi. You're overprotective. You have a tendency to try to do something even when you could just leave it alone."

"But…" But still. "Once I find out what am I supposed to do? I know about these things whether I want to or not so I can't look the other way or pretend not to know."

"Ha hah, so would it have been better if you'd forgotten it all, like missy class president? That just might be the best outcome for people like you, Araragi. Forgetting it all little Shinobu too."

"How could I forget…"

Something like that?

Of course it wasn't possible.

It wasn't ever going to turn out like it had for Hanekawa.

"That's right," Oshino said, "little Shinobu, too yes, right. You're going to have to look after her all by yourself once I'm gone. That was the choice you made though you're of course free to abandon her, too."

"Come on Oshino."

"You need to always be aware of the fact. Because Shinobu isn't human. You shouldn't allow yourself to get weirdly empathetic. She's a vampire. She can look like that now, but that doesn't change the fact okay?"

"……"

"Sorry, was that a mean thing to say? There's no need to worry, though, we've gotten to know each other so well. I'm not going to disappear all of a sudden one day without even saying goodbye. I'm an adult, I do know my manners. But if you're thinking about what to do after graduating from high school I think it wouldn't hurt to think about this while you're at it."

“So what you’re trying to say is that it’s irresponsible for me to attempt to save everyone I come across? That it’s irresponsible to be kind to everyone Hanekawa told me that one, too. But, Oshino, I can’t become someone like you. Like you say, I’m about a tenth vampire an actual aberration. I can’t get on the human side and go around banishing aberrations.”

If I did, the very first one I needed to banish was myself.

Then Shinobu.

And that wasn’t happening.

It wasn’t something I could do.

“I wouldn’t say that’s true,” Oshino told me. “This job is all knowledge and know-how anyway. A half-human, half-creature who hunts spirits? Sounds cool, like a manga character.”

“Well…maybe it is possible, since there’s even a Hawaiian-shirted specialist in the field…”

“And,” Oshino reminded me, “*if ever in your life you feel like it, Araragi…you can abandon Shinobu and go back to being a full-fledged human* I hope you don’t forget that, either.”

We were in the remains of the shrine.

That abandoned shrine atop the mountain.

It was the dead of the night, after we had been busy preparing for so long.

I considered waiting until the next day, but if we waited one more day, those scale marks, the Jagirinawa's grip, might reach up to her neck (she wouldn't be able to hide it if that happened since she couldn't walk around wearing a scarf in this season□even if regular people couldn't see those markings). The middle of the night or not, we decided to fight for every minute and second and do it as soon as possible. My family took a hands-off approach with me, and the same went without saying for Kanbaru. A slight issue arose regarding Sengoku's curfew as an active-duty middle schooler, but she asked one of her school friends to come up with an alibi for her (a sleepover or something like that). It seems obvious, but Sengoku apparently had friends other than the one who had cursed her.

Having a lot of friends.

A good thing, I thought.

While I was more than a little worried at first about doing this at the same shrine ruins where everything began, Oshino gave us his stamp of approval, telling us it was fine. I thought he said it because we had already placed the talisman on the main hall, but it was actually a matter of process. Even if we were dealing with *bad things,* all we had to do was get them on our side□according to him. The Jagirinawa's

existence would be more conspicuous precisely because of the location□it would be easier to come in contact with□or something like that.

I didn't get it, to be honest.

But, I guessed, it was an expert's advice. I'd trust it.

Shinobu was in a room on the third floor so I gave her a casual greeting (She really had gotten in a fight with Oshino over Mister Donuts. He'd eaten all of her favorite flavors yet again. Mèmè Oshino, you're not even immature, you're just childish) before leaving the abandoned cram school and heading straight back home. Sure enough, Kanbaru hadn't laid a finger on Sengoku despite sharing a room with her the whole time, nor had she gone after my little sisters, both of whom were now home.

"Great job holding yourself back, Kanbaru!"

"Yes…and hearing the earnestness in your words of praise, for the first time I'm wondering if I'd joked around too much in your presence, and am regretting it…"

Kanbaru seemed depressed.

She not only hadn't tried to seduce Sengoku, but they'd been chatting.

"Miss Kanbaru was kind to me, Big Brother," the introverted Sengoku jumped in to stand up for her. "She let me borrow her volleyball shorts, too."

"That doesn't count as kindness," I played the straight man for Sengoku, a first.

A day for the history books.

In any case, talking to her was hard because our exchanges weren't

punctuated with jokes unlike with the rest of the bunch. Thanks to those bastards, I couldn't have normal conversations anymore. Sadly for Sengoku, she'd have to go along with our style.

I had her and Kanbaru sneak out of my house while I kept my two little sisters busy, and then I stepped out, too, with nary an excuse. My sisters seemed suspicious (especially my youngest sister, perceptive girl), but I forced them away in the end and proceeded to the rendezvous point to meet up with the girls. We went to a general (and not a convenience) store that was open late to buy the needed tools (neither Kanbaru nor Sengoku had much money on them given how sudden this was, so I paid for it all) before heading to the mountains. We all walked.

"Sengoku."

"Uh, yes…Big Brother?"

She'd twitched.

Maybe she thought I was going to yell at her.

So delicate, like she was made of glass.

"Those marks on you□I heard they actually hurt. Are you okay?"

"Ah…" All the color drained from her face. "U-Um… Please don't be mad."

"No, I'm not trying to blame you for anything."

She probably thought I was about to scold her for lying. I didn't know if she was timid, or too quick to see herself as a victim… Every time a character like her appeared in a manga, I'd wonder how irritating someone like that would be in real life, but it actually wasn't that bad… I simply felt like protecting her, prior to whether or not I was a good person. Of course, the fact that she was quite a bit younger than me

helped.

“I was just wondering if you were okay.”

“W-Well.” Sengoku tugged her hat far down her face. As if to hide it. As if she didn’t want to be seen. “It hurts, like something is tightening down on me, but…I can still bear it.”

Pulverizing the bones to make it easier to eat.

Snake behavior.

“…Having to bear it is wrong to begin with. If something hurts it’s okay to say so.”

“He’s right,” Kanbaru butted in. “Getting tied up is one thing, but staying tied up takes a surprising toll on your body. Whether it’s a snake or ropes.”

“Kanbaru, why you would gloss over getting tied up, and more subtly, the emotional toll of it, baffles me.”

This woman didn’t regret a thing.

Sengoku stifled a giggle at our back-and-forth.

Despite her timidity, maybe she was quick to laugh. In that case, talking about the thirteen-sign zodiac, which set off even Kanbaru, was absolutely off limits around Sengoku. She might laugh herself to death.

We sprayed each other with a bug repellent from the general store before going up the mountain. It was the middle of the night, which meant we needed to worry about bugs before any aberrations. While we were all fully protected in long sleeves and long pants, it was an additional safety measure for Kanbaru and me and could help Sengoku down along the line.

Once we finished, we got going.

It was pitch black, of course.

As we climbed the stairs, all three of us lit the way ahead with the flashlights we'd bought at the same general store. The wild animals and insects were horribly loud. It wasn't that way in the afternoon, and I felt like we were explorers on some expedition. I was almost deluded into thinking I was lost in a jungle.

"You know, Sengoku," I said.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering about something. Why did you turn that boy down? You didn't have any idea your friend had feelings for him, right? So there wasn't any reason for you to say no."

"Well…"

She fell silent.

Someone with so little mental fortitude, who went quiet over just that much, rejecting a confession of love was even more perplexing…

"I-I'm sorry," she apologized. For no reason.

"Um, it's not something you need to apologize for."

"Ah, y-yes, you're right. I-I'm sorry. I'm…well… I'm sorry."

She'd apologized twice between a single pair of quotation marks.

Three times in total.

She was over-apologizing.

"No, Sengoku□"

Kanbaru spoke up. "That was a rather insensitive question. It's unlike you. Be more considerate."

"Oh…really?"

"Yes, really. There are plenty of reasons to say no. In fact, why date someone you don't particularly love?"

“Hmm…”

It was a legitimate point.

I also realized that Kanbaru making one came to me as a surprise.

“Take me, for example,” she said. “It’s because I love you that□”

“We’re not going out!”

“Huh…is that true?” asked Sengoku, puzzled. “You aren’t dating Miss Kanbaru?”

“No!”

“O-Oh… You seemed to get along so well that…I was sure you two were.”

“I’ll admit that we get along.”

About as well as I got along with Hachikuji.

Then again, unlike Hachikuji, at least Kanbaru never maligned me… In that sense, maybe I got along with her a little better.

…As for the girl I was actually dating, she only ever seemed to malign me…

“Kanbaru. Back me up and tell her no.”

“Mm. He’s right, we’re not going out.” She told Sengoku in an explanatory tone, “He and I are just having fun□we’re playing around.”

“That is very open to misinterpretation, isn’t it!”

“We’re such good friends that we could dismiss anything as a sort of accident.”

“Are you just being straight-up pernicious?! I hate you!”

“Hey. That kind of hurt.”

“Ack… Er, sorry. I love you.”

Wasn’t she going to receive anything I said with great joy? What a difficult girl.

Actually, I was the weak one here for apologizing.

Even as Kanbaru and I bickered, Sengoku mumbled, “Oh…so you’re not going out,” sounding relieved for some reason.

“I turned him down because there’s someone else I like,” she told us. Her apparent embarrassment was sweet. “But…that friend seems to have misunderstood me…and now this happened… I-I wonder if it was my fault…”

“Don’t blame yourself. Then again, it wasn’t supposed to end up this bad□it’s because of that shrine.”

Because of that shrine.

“Oh yeah, Kanbaru. You’re probably going to start feeling sick again… A talisman’s effect isn’t immediate, or so I’ve been told.”

“Fine with me. Plus, I can be ready for it if I know it’s coming.”

“I see.”

What a jock.

All it took was guts, huh?

I’d normally refute it as unscientific but found myself believing it because it was Kanbaru. She was, after all, a formidable woman who’d gone from clumsy girl to national-level basketball player thanks to nothing but guts and the effort to go with it.

“Big Brother Koyomi, how much do you remember about before?”

“Uh…well, not much, to be honest. I don’t have a very good memory.”

“Oh…”

Sengoku was visibly disappointed.

“You, on the other hand,” I hastily turned the subject to her, “remembered me. I’m impressed because we’d only played together a

few times when you were little. And I was just your friend's older brother. You normally forget that stuff."

"I didn't get to play with people all that much," Sengoku said haltingly. "Back then, the only friend I had who'd play with me after school was Rara…"

Rara must have meant my youngest sister. Right, the friends she brought over used to call her that. Her grade-school nickname, Rara, excerpted from our family name, Araragi. Now, though, she and my other little sister combined were Tsuganoki Second Middle School's "Fire Sisters"…

How things change.

Of course people change.

But if we're going to talk about those days, back then I was annoyed when my little sisters brought over their friends and made me play with them…

I'd felt shy about playing with girls.

That's how it was at that age.

"Though Rara and I don't go to the same middle school…all the times I got to play with her, and you, are my precious memories."

"I see…"

That made me feel better.

By the way, I hadn't told Sengoku about the aberrations that Kanbaru and I bore, only giving her a whiff of the fact that we had anything to do with them. I certainly could share that with her, and maybe I needed to in terms of building a relationship of trust, but after talking it over with Kanbaru, I paid heed to the possibility that it might only accelerate a mental breakdown. So Sengoku probably didn't

understand why anyone would feel sick from going to the shrine, and perhaps thought that Kanbaru was spiritually sensitive, or something. Then again, that wasn't altogether wrong.

"I'm an only child," Sengoku said. "I was jealous that she had an older brother."

"……"

It sounded like a case of wanting what you can't have.

Like someone without a little sister wanting a little sister.

At times I wished I had an older brother or sister, or a younger brother and envied people who had them. But maybe it was different for someone like me, who had actual little sisters, and for Sengoku, who was an only child.

So she was an only child.

"Hey, what about you, Kanbaru? You don't have any siblings do you?"

"Nope. I'm an only child, too."

"I see."

And so was Senjogahara. And Hachikuji, and Hanekawa.

Huh, so they were all only children.

And Shinobu?

Did vampires have siblings?

"Okay we're here."

I was leading the way, so I was, of course, the first to arrive.

The ruins of a shrine.

A desolate, barren sight.

The talisman was still stuck to the door.

"Are you feeling okay, Kanbaru?"

“Yes. Better than I thought.”

“Try saying something stupid.”

“I like reading books on the road and making myself carsick.”

“Try saying something funny.”

“I couldn’t help it! He threatened not to pay me if I didn’t!”

“Try saying something perverted.”

“Just when I thought the girl I liked was a virgin, it turned out she was vermin.”

“Okay.”

That last one was a little weird, but she seemed fine.

Next to me, Sengoku was hugging herself and shaking. We’d tickled her funny bone.

She really was quick to laugh.

It seemed she was more amused by my interaction with Kanbaru than the actual content, but in fact that was a good audience reaction, so I couldn’t complain.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s get ready now… Let’s get ready already.”

Kanbaru asked me, “Why did you bother to rephrase yourself?”

We found an appropriate spot…which is to say a location that wasn’t too overgrown, then placed four flashlights, the three we held and one more in my bag, in each corner. They formed a square and illuminated the center.

The ground was dirt.

We drew lines in it next using a nearby tree branch and linked the flashlights into an actual square□a so-called spiritual boundary. It was pretty makeshift but would do, according to Oshino, because the simple fact that it was demarcated was what mattered most about these

boundaries. We spread a plastic sheet on the ground to cover the square. Another purchase from the general store, naturally.

And then Sengoku entered the square.

Alone.

In a school swimsuit.

"……"

The swimsuit wasn't from the general store (they don't sell them at general stores). Just like those volleyball shorts, Kanbaru had "happened" to have one ready.

I said to her, "You didn't have the money to buy a flashlight, so what are you doing carrying around volleyball shorts and school swimsuits?"

"There are some things in this world that money can't buy."

"I completely agree, but volleyball shorts and school swimsuits aren't among them."

"I was trying to play to your tastes."

"Well, don't."

"You're not denying it's to your taste?"

I checked to find that Sengoku was indeed chuckling to herself in the boundary… It was for the joke factor that she was wearing a school swimsuit in the middle of a decrepit shrine, but she found it funny too?

At any rate.

To see how the purification was proceeding, we needed to keep track of the scale marks on her skin, and Oshino's instructions were that she shouldn't stay in long sleeves and long pants, but we couldn't have her in nothing but a pair of volleyball shorts outdoors. While showing us the Jagirinawa's marks in my room, Sengoku had taken her hands off of

her chest at one point, causing her to start crying all over again—a mishap that even an honest guy like me didn't share with Oshino—so this was particularly necessary.

And so, a school swimsuit.

Instead of changing at the shrine, she'd worn it under her long sleeves and long pants like an elementary schoolgirl might. Though we could see the scale markings on her legs, the swimsuit hid her torso, making it difficult to gauge the extent of her affliction—and maybe I was just imagining it, but they seemed to have climbed up to around her neck. Had its grip on her tightened since the evening?

If so, we needed to hurry.

We simply didn't see it.

But Sengoku's body—was still in the grip of a giant snake.

I handed her the amulet Oshino had given me.

"Now, sit in the center…on the sheet. Hold the amulet as tight as you can, close your eyes, calm your breathing—and all you need to do is pray."

"Pray…to what?" asked Sengoku.

"To something. In this case, probably to—"

The snake.

The snake god.

The Jagirinawa.

"Okay…I'll try my best."

"Alrighty."

"Big Brother Koyomi…you'll watch over me?"

"I will."

"You have to watch over me."

"…Yup, I will."

In any case, it was the only thing I could do.

Honestly, it was all up to Sengoku from here.

No matter what happened.

People who get saved got saved on their own.

I exited the boundary, and together with Kanbaru, who had just finished lighting a mosquito coil, circled around at a distance to stand in front of Sengoku.

"Okay…"

Sengoku's eyes were already shut.

Both of her hands were squeezed tight in front of her chest.

The ritual had already begun.

Not even Oshino knew how long it would take, he'd said to be prepared to stay here all night in the worst case. Kanbaru and I were one thing, but I didn't know if Sengoku's psyche could hold out for that long. We'd just have to try. There was no rehearsing this.

The glow of the flashlights.

They gently illuminated her from four corners.

"Hey," Kanbaru spoke to me.

Her voice was so small I could have missed it, even though she stood right next to me. It must have been her way of being considerate to Sengoku, who was concentrating inside the boundary, but in that case, wasn't it best not to talk at all?

"What is it?" I said. "No more banter from here on out."

We couldn't afford to have Sengoku laugh during the ritual.

It would all be for naught then.

"Yes, I know… But there's something I was wondering about, now

that we're here."

"What?"

"The serpent-slaying that she stoutly carried out on her own. What about all that?"

"That's one hell of a way to put it…but yeah. You mean chopping up those snakes."

"Yes. Wasn't doing that, only in the proper way, the correct measure, rather than this onerous ceremony?"

"Well, yes…and I said the same thing, but it sounds like that way would take even more time. According to Oshino, that is. Apparently, when it comes to snake-chopping, what's important is actually the locale."

"The locale… And since *bad things* are gathered here…"

"Well, this spot is the absolute worst, but that doesn't mean anywhere else would do. I didn't have enough time to ask for details, but he talked about it not being very effective unless you use snakes from Tohoku, or something."

"Regional differences?"

"Regional differences. Important when it comes to aberrations."

They had to be spoken about, and all.

Sengoku had chosen this mountain because she'd heard she could find snakes here, but she'd needed to do a better job picking her mountain and her snakes for a ritual□supposedly. Of course, as far as that went, it would have been best if Nadeko Sengoku hadn't done anything to begin with.

She chose this hangout, of all places.

This spot where *bad things* gathered.

But now, ironically enough□we needed to get those *bad things* on our side to help cleanse Sengoku of her aberration.

“Got it, makes sense,” Kanbaru said. “Mister Oshino keeps some pretty handy things around, doesn’t he? An amulet you can use to exorcise aberrations?”

“When I bothered him about it, he said it’s not that handy of an item. It’s useless except in cases like this one.”

It only worked because the aberration had been sent by a human.

And only because it was a snake.

“So we’re combating foul play with foul play,” Kanbaru commented.

“He described it as one heterodoxy for another.”

“I guess it’s fine if it saves Sengoku… Still, you really do try to help out every person you come across, don’t you?”

Kind to everyone.

Irresponsibly□kind to everyone.

“I wouldn’t say every person, but I do whenever I can,” I answered. “Especially if it’s someone I know.”

“I think that’s part of what my dear senior loves about you, and I, too, think it’s part of your charm. I□at this point, I’m glad that she’s going out with someone like you. But I do hope□”

Kanbaru paused before continuing.

“If□the day ever comes when you have to choose just one person, I hope you’ll choose her without a second thought.”

“……”

“You’re free to sacrifice yourself as much as you want, but please take good care of her… Not that I really have any right to be saying

this.”

Kanbaru’s left arm.

It once tried to kill me.

Not because anyone shackled it.

With a firm will of its own, as an aberration.

“Kanbaru…I do think you have the right to say that. In fact I think you’re especially qualified.”

“…Good to know.”

“I’m just as glad that you’re Senjogahara’s junior as you’re glad that I’m her boyfriend.”

“Hearing that from you really helps. Oh…”

There, Kanbaru pointed straight ahead.

At Sengoku, who was there praying with all her heart and soul.

And when I looked at her.

The scale markings on the parts of her body that weren’t covered by the school swimsuit those clear traces etched across every inch of her skin were gradually fading. Oshino had said to be prepared to spend all night, but not even ten minutes had passed.

So it was powerful.

It was going well, too.

The scale marks at the base of her neck disappeared.

The scale marks around her collarbones disappeared.

The Jagirinawa was leaving Sengoku.

“It looks like it’s going forward without a hitch.”

“Yes,” Kanbaru agreed.

“Neat.”

Given my own presence, which tended to jinx everything, this state

of affairs, quite honestly, could qualify as unexpected. Well, thank goodness. Now Sengoku needed to stay focused for another minute□

"Still," I said, "it's not like everything will be over once we rid her of the snake." To avoid sapping Sengoku's motivation, I hadn't told her this ahead of time, of course. "At the minimum, her relationship with that old friend is going to be irreparably broken."

"Well…you might be right." Kanbaru nodded. "There aren't too many people who could forgive such a thing. Nope… Not that Sengoku would want to mend the friendship, and the other party might not want to, either."

"So a breakdown□in their relationship."

Humans were scarier than aberrations.

No need to give voice to such a cliché, though.

"Romantic entanglements are so damn scary," I said. "But I wonder who Sengoku has a crush on. I'm a little jealous to know that someone out there is the object of that cute a girl's affections."

Were this a rom-com manga, the love interest would turn out to be none other than me, but I highly doubted that was the case here. I was her "big brother" and nothing more.

Brother and sister□

While I said I was jealous, I had a girlfriend, so of course, if Sengoku really did have feelings for me, it would just be a headache… But using this opportunity to revive our ties perhaps wasn't such a bad thing. It would be sweet, and she was precarious enough that someone needed to watch over her, though I had no idea what my little sisters would say…

"She is a girl, after all. And□she's fourteen? Heheh," Kanbaru

chuckled. “Myself included, not every girl her age longs for a prince in a white coat to come in and swoop her away.”

“Well yeah, I’m sure…”

Because, for one thing, it would be a prince on a white horse.

Sheesh, white coat… Like a doctor?

Ophiuchus.

“Come on, Kanbaru, didn’t I tell you no idle talk? We’re not done yet, so we can’t risk breaking her concen□”

“Look!” Kanbaru suddenly yelled.

I was the one whose concentration had broken. Carelessly□I’d taken my eyes off of Sengoku. When I returned my gaze back at her□Nadeko Sengoku had collapsed face-up on the plastic sheet we’d laid on the ground□and was twitching freakishly, violently.

Her mouth.

It was open wide.

Her jaw was stretched as far as it would go.

Like a snake□swallowing an egg.

Like there could even be□a snake’s head inside.

“Wh-What happened?!”

“I-I don’t know□she suddenly…”

The scale markings on Sengoku’s body□were disappearing.

They were *about halfway* gone.

But□the *other half* remained.

They hadn’t disappeared.

And.

They were even on Sengoku’s neck, where they didn’t seem to be

only moments ago. The snake—the Jagirinawa had her in its grip.

What happened…what went wrong?

Where had we gone wrong?

The illustration of the Jagirinawa that Oshino had said was in the *Compilation of Snake Curses*—of a man constricted by a snake that entered into his body through his mouth—not a deathly but a murderous, killing aberration.

A serpent god.

Possession by a serpent god.

"Did it fail?!" shouted Kanbaru. "Is that it?! It failed, and the purification ritual went out of control, ran amok—"

"No—this ritual isn't supposed to be a risky stunt… It isn't some powerful feat. That's why it's heterodox. It shouldn't be double-teaming her, there's no reason it would. Because *this is supposed to be like a negotiation with the aberration*—"

Ask it.

You need to ask it—Oshino had said.

Humble yourself before it.

And yet… Did Sengoku let herself get distracted, like in Senjogahara's case? Even then…the aberration suddenly reaching its final stage like this…

It was going so well until we were halfway in, too!

"…Halfway?"

Crap, I realized belatedly.

Sengoku was writhing on the plastic sheet.

Her legs, still yet to fill out, that extended from the school swimsuit—the scale markings were half gone from them as well.

Half gone—in only the crudest way.

The scale marks had completely disappeared from her right leg—but remained on every inch of her left leg, from her toes to her crotch.

Not a single one had disappeared.

I didn't know about her torso, but it was the same for her neck and collarbones, as clear as day once you noticed—

"Kanbaru…I had it all wrong. *If only we could see,* we'd have gotten it right away—"

"What do you mean?!"

"*The Jagirinawa—it wasn't just one of them. There were two.*"

"……kk!"

Even so—

There were hints we should have picked up on.

The traces covered *every inch of her skin* aside from her arms and her neck up. Her toes, her shins, her calves—and she had two legs. For one snake to *wind itself around every inch* of both of her legs was structurally impossible. If there'd been only one snake, *there couldn't have been markings on her inner thighs.*

From the tips of each leg's toes.

A Jagirinawa had its grip on her—one for each leg.

As if they were constricting Sengoku's body.

Two snakes.

"…Dammit!"

One of them—had been removed with the power of Oshino's amulet.

The Jagirinawa had gone away.

Gone away *here and there.*

But then the amulet's power was spent.

I hadn’t said enough—had I realized that there were two Jagirinawa, Oshino would have come up with an appropriate plan. Unlike every other time, there was no limit to how much he would help. Nadeko Sengoku was a victim, and he was pulling out all the stops. But because we’d premised our discussion on one Jagirinawa, he’d prepared a strategy for just one—

Which is why the other—was running wild. Of course it was—the other giant snake with which it had shared its grip on Sengoku had been exorcised.

“Kanbaru! Stay there—no, get back!”

“Shouldn’t we contact Mister Oshino—”

“He doesn’t have a cell phone!”

Not on principle—but because he failed at modern gizmos.

So—our only choice was a hardline approach.

I rushed into the makeshift boundary—into the square illuminated by the flashlights. I grabbed onto Sengoku’s body and sat her upright—she was hot to the touch. You could say burning. It was so bad I thought my hand might get scalded—

The scale markings at the base of her neck.

They were now digging so far into her skin that calling them traces would be ludicrous. They were eating into her to the point of altering her silhouette—gnawing in as if to pulverize bone and tear flesh.

As if to chop her up.

Eating into her.

I could almost hear her body—groan and creak.

“Sengoku…”

Her eyes had rolled back—she’d lost consciousness.

Swallowed whole□

“Nkk…!”

I laid her body, which I was holding, on the plastic sheet again. Then, I slowly reached my hands toward her.

No, not toward her.

Toward the Jagirinawa.

“*Even if I can’t see it□I should be able to touch it.*”

He’d said so.

Ever since spring break□vampire blood ran through my veins. Blood. You could say I was an aberration myself□and an aberration should be able to touch another aberration.

If I could touch it, I could peel it off.

Right.

The key was to imagine it. To visualize the Jagirinawa through the traces that its scales etched into Sengoku’s body□and to puzzle out the manner it exercised its grip. I couldn’t afford to be wrong. Dammit… Like the younger of my two little sisters, and unlike the older, I was ever the indoorsy type…so this was my first time touching a snake. The first one ever was going to be an aberration…

Courage, me.

Even Sengoku, who used to play with that youngest sister of mine, caught more than ten snakes on her own□*what kind of big brother feared doing as much?*

“Agh…hkk!”

Slither□

An unpleasant sensation, in both of my hands.

A sensation like sticking my hands into mucus.

A sensation like spiked scales stabbing into them.

It was plain disgusting.

What made it disgusting was that I was touching something I couldn't see. I'd never thought that doing so would be as viscerally repulsive. I'd mustered such a strong will to touch it, but now wanted to take my hands off of the aberration as soon as I possibly could.

I tried to use its sliminess to my advantage by sliding my hands around it to get them in the right position. Grabbing its cylindrical body, about the size of what a musclehead's thigh must be, I then pulled with all my might.

It wasn't like I had the physical prowess of a vampire as well.

Plus, it was slippery.

Because I was pulling in the same direction as its scales, I wasn't putting my strength to much use. I changed my approach and dug my nails into the giant snake's body (so soft it felt like my fingers sank into it) before pulling again.

To peel it off!

"G…aaaaaagh!"

An unimaginable pain ran through my right arm.

I looked at where the pain came from to see blood spurting everywhere. My arm was *flattened* as if a machine press had gotten hold of everything from my wrist to my elbow, and two deep, deep holes had been bored into that flattened area.

"A-Already?!"

The snake's head had already pulled out of Sengoku's mouth, my

fingers burrowing into its torso had been understood as an attack, and it had exited her body to strike back at me. I didn't notice until it bit me because I couldn't see it

"Oww…wwwww!!"

The overwhelming pain made me leap and roll away confused meanwhile, Sengoku's body seemed to flap and flop at random around the plastic sheet in the square, likely as a result of the Jagirinawa undoing its grasp on her body. I could only guess since I couldn't see it, but it must have been the case, given the situation.

Which meant that it was coming to grip and possess me next!

Before it could try, I slammed my flattened right arm on the ground. Even greater pain came over me but a moment before my arm hit the ground, I could sense the buried fangs the Jagirinawa's, no doubt sliding out. Realizing that my plan was to pin its head between my arm and the ground, it had preempted me. As a result, all I managed to do was bang my injured arm against the earth.

It almost felt like my arm had torn off.

A moment later, it was my leg.

My left ankle.

Scrush a flattening sound.

As with my arm it seemed this snake could crush a human body just with its bite… What monstrous jaw strength. Well, it was a literal monster's jaw strength, but even so

Estimating where the Jagirinawa's head would be based on the fang marks drilled into my ankle, I nevertheless stuck my fingers between its mouth and my foot and pried them apart though it was biting down on me with an absurd amount of force, I used the small gap I created to

twist my leg out. It was shot, down to the bones, but the nerves still seemed intact. It was fine, it still moved.

It would have been nice if I could hold on to the snake's mouth, but I reflexively let go when I felt a wet slap on my hand (the snake's long, forked tongue must have licked me).

"Nkk!"

Still, the blind, haphazard kick I sent the Jagirinawa's way with my other leg seemed to hit it, or at least it felt that way. It was the same sensation as kicking a rubber ball, so I doubted that I'd dealt any damage. I then rolled backward, two times, three times, to put some distance between myself and the Jagirinawa.

It was only the day before yesterday that I'd given Shinobu my blood.

That meant my body should have been able to heal itself even faster than normal□but my flattened right arm and left ankle weren't recovering so easily. They didn't even show signs of doing so. The pain wasn't going away, either… Wait…was the Jagirinawa a poisonous snake?

Even vampires are susceptible to poison. All the more so considering how minimally vampiric I was. Shinobu in her prime would have brushed off such a wound□

I hopped myself back up on one leg. My right arm dangled uselessly at my side… It hurt too much even to raise.

It wasn't as if I had no experience battling aberrations, and their kin and ilk, over the past few months. In fact, you could say I was fairly experienced for the short amount of time. But□I'd never fought an aberration that I couldn't see. I'd always thought of the invisible man as

a ridiculous concept in this day and age, not even good for a joke. I never imagined that an invisible enemy could be this dreadful!

I was up against a snake.

I recalled that snakes had some tissue called pit organs that allowed them to sense infrared radiation and to find prey via heat□which meant our eye levels' height difference probably didn't work to my advantage. It went past trying not to be seen by your enemy while seeing him.

Ssszzzsss…

I could hear a sound.

Of something crawling, creeping my way.

"……kk! A-Ahh!"

While I was able to stand on my left leg, I couldn't use it for much else. My movement was now as inefficient as it could be, but□the Jagirinawa had *probably* tried to attack my upper body, and I *dare say* that I dodged it.

Turning around, I tried to guess where it landed.

The Jagirinawa's landing point□

Was clear to me.

"I□I might be able to do this."

I just might□be able to do it.

I stood on guard so I could confirm my guess.

I waited for the second strike, my eyes glued□I kept my eyes glued to the Jagirinawa's current position. To tell what your opponent is thinking□you look into their eyes. Not that I knew whether I should be looking into the snake's eyes or pit organs, not that the Jagirinawa was

visible to begin with

It moved!

I leapt aside and dodged it.

Clamp! came a noise from right beside me, as if a bear trap had been set off—no doubt the sound of the Jagirinawa's mouth closing as it missed. It gave me chills—if that thing ever got around my head, it was game over. It'd be bitten straight off.

But…

I saw a way for me to win.

This arena—was my ally.

A dirt ground.

Overgrown with grass.

And snakes—were creatures that crawled on the ground.

That was true even if the creature was an aberration.

I might not see the Jagirinawa itself, but it left behind a clear trail—just like the scale markings etched into Sengoku's body.

The churned ground sent up dust.

The grass parted like it was in the way.

On asphalt or concrete, I wouldn't be so lucky. If the serpent exorcism were taking place at the abandoned cram school where Oshino lived, like in Senjogahara or Kanbaru's case—I'd be toast. But wait.

Maybe this stage direction came courtesy of Oshino.

Right, come to think of it, this aberration could ignore clothes. It only made sense for it to be able to do the same for dirt or grass. Even its slithering *sszss* and the sound of its mouth snapping shut shouldn't

have been audible. If the Jagirinawa couldn't ignore the field's physicality—that was the arena's doing. On these grounds, the serpent, too, merely invisible, existed.

Because it was an aberration.

Like me and Kanbaru.

Like a prank curse actually taking.

An air pocket—a hangout.

Where bad things—gathered.

Oshino had said *to make allies of the bad things*—which meant this must have been part of the measure. The basic stratagem was predicated on creating a boundary, but the abandoned cram school hadn't been designated as the stage, just in case something unexpected like this happened—and maybe it was all thanks to the enhanced field that I could hear and touch the aberration.

Mèmè Oshino.

It hurt to feel so powerless.

The upshot was that for Senjogahara and Kanbaru too, I'd turned it all in to Oshino—I relied on him from start to finish. He wasn't going to be in our town forever, and yet, in each and every case—this time too!

Maybe I was the one who wasn't regretting a thing.

I'd learned nothing from all my time with Oshino.

I didn't see—a thing.

"Nkk…"

I somehow dodged the Jagirinawa's next attack, too.

Still…it felt like I was getting nowhere. If I focused on just dodging its attacks, then thanks to the power of the *bad things* that gathered on the premises, I could gauge the Jagirinawa's position and movements

with some degree of accuracy from how it disturbed the dirt and grass—but striking back was a pretty tall order. Attacking would require wild guesses, and my right arm and left leg were out of commission. How was I supposed to mount a proper attack?

It was like—my body wasn't healing at all.

The pain was only getting worse.

It might have been my imagination, but it seemed to be spreading.

Could it really have been—poison?

Neurotoxins, hemotoxins, cardiotoxins.

A serum was—indispensable.

Would my attacks work on an aberration to begin with? Even regular snakes had such vitality that they seemed to refuse to die. Could a half-assed thing like me, a human with a bit of residual vampirism, hope to oppose it? It didn't seem completely futile, given that the Jagirinawa started attacking me the moment I dug my fingers into its body—but at this rate, wasn't kiting it all I could ever hope to do?

What would count as defeating this aberration?

No.

There was a more fundamental question… *Was it even okay to defeat*—this aberration? If I defeated it, would that be the end? Was it the *handiest* solution—as Mèmè Oshino might say?

Demons, cats, crabs, snails, monkeys—

Snakes.

Some saw snakes as holy—

"*My senior Araragi!*"

It was Kanbaru.

Suruga Kanbaru—was dashing toward me.

At full speed.

As if she were using her no-mere-high-schooler legs to kamikaze me.

Idiot, I told her to stay away no, wait!

"……!"

Right…maybe Kanbaru could!

Kanbaru's left arm, the monkey's paw, the monkey's arm had the terrifying attack power we needed to counter the Jagirinawa! Within her left arm resided a catapult that could smash through concrete blocks unaided. The Jagirinawa could have a body of steel and still be helpless against Kanbaru's unbridled strength.

But if there was a problem, it was that unlike me, Kanbaru didn't have any healing abilities. If the Jagirinawa dodged her attack and retaliated with a bite, there would be no way to undo the damage. It would be irreparable and irreversible and if I was right and the Jagirinawa was a poisonous snake, her life would be in immediate danger under even the most optimistic of scenarios. How ironic. I had the ability to recover from attacks but couldn't deal any damage, while the opposite went for her. Another factor I needed to keep in mind was affinity. This field was a bane to Kanbaru. Even now, she must be feeling pretty sick

In fact.

However.

"*Forgive me!*"

Kanbaru's attack was aimed at me.

Not the Jagirinawa. Me.

With that left arm, she grabbed me hard by the base of my neck

and, drawing on her momentum, used her vaunted legs to all but leap—and shove me. I, with my one good leg, couldn't hope to stand firm. Like a speck of dust in a raging sandstorm—I was blown away. Her left hand, still planted on my neck, wouldn't let go. It didn't let go. It held on. We flew about fifteen feet in the air like that—

Before slamming into the ground.

It may have been a soft, dirt surface blanketed with foliage.

But the full-body impact was so stunning that I couldn't breathe for a moment.

Kanbaru had made good on her word and shoved me off my feet with her left arm alone—though it wasn't down onto a bed.

I yelled, "Wh-What was that for—Kanbaru!"

She silently lay on top of me, in a full mount in grappling terms, using not only her left arm but her entire body to restrain me. I couldn't begin to resist given the state of my right arm and left—no.

Not even if my body was in perfect condition.

Not even if Kanbaru's arm wasn't a monkey's arm.

If she really tried to pin me down, there was nothing I could do about it. A jock on the national level against a washout whose only extracurricular activity was biking home. Being a year older or a guy didn't matter one bit. Struggle as I might, I couldn't even budge. My body was pasted to the ground, and though Kanbaru couldn't be that heavy, I felt like she was crushing me.

"Kanbaru…you—"

"Stay still! Calm down!"

"Calm down?"

"The poison is going to spread through your blood if you don't!"

Kanbaru was close to me□our faces were practically touching, but she shouted so loud I thought she'd perforate my eardrums.

"*Snakes are savage but shy creatures□they won't do anything if you don't approach and assault them! Don't provoke it! Just stay still, and the snake will go away!*"

"……kk."

Snake□behavior.

It was the same□even for an aberration.

Be it gripping or the use of pit organs.

Which meant□

Kanbaru was exactly right.

Even I□knew that much.

If I stayed still□the Jagirinawa would leave.

I'd already peeled it off of Sengoku.

The snake□would go back.

"…B-But, Kanbaru! That□"

It would only go back.

It wouldn't be banished.

It would return.

Turning back on the caster of the curse□

When one is cursed, two holes are dug.

When one is cursed□two holes are dug.

Like a snake piercing the skin□two holes are dug.

"I beg you□" Kanbaru said in a pained voice. Like she was pleading with me. "Don't mistake who you're trying to save here."

Ssszzzsss.

Ssszzzsss.

Ssszzzsss.

I heard it.

The sound of the Jagirinawa crawling on the ground—I couldn't see the dust rising or the grass being parted from my angle. But—I could tell the sound was receding at a steady pace. The Jagirinawa—was trying to crawl away. Perhaps it had lost sight of me after Kanbaru's left arm had transported me fifteen feet away in one go. Or maybe—the Jagirinawa hadn't given a damn about me in the first place.

The snake—was going back.

Back to the one who had cast it.

Bringing back with it—its curse.

"……"

Slump—I could feel my strength leaving me. I wouldn't make it in time. I could give chase, but what hope did I have of following a snake I couldn't see? Its sound and its presence would vanish once it left the grounds. And, to begin with, there was no getting out from under Kanbaru.

Even if I could—I couldn't see myself doing it.

"My senior Araragi…"

Kanbaru must have felt me slump powerlessly—there was concern in her voice.

"I'm sorry," I apologized to her. I couldn't think of anything else to say. "I'm sorry I forced that role onto you."

"Please, don't apologize… I wouldn't know how to reply."

"Yeah…sorry."

"My senior Araragi."

"I'm sorry, Kanbaru… I'm really sorry…"

Sorry was all I could say to her.

It felt like I was always apologizing to Kanbaru when it mattered the most. I really felt bad. Burdening her…for being such a pathetic senior, I really did feel bad.

Kanbaru's decision was the right one. There was no denying it. I could have continued, but I had almost no chance of beating the Jagirinawa. How could I, a mock aberration, ever handle a real, live aberration? Frantically dodging the snake's biting attacks and collapsing from the poison rushing through my body as a result was the best outcome I could have hoped for.

But I just hadn't been able to give up.

It was like I'd been throwing a tantrum.

That's why it hurt so much.

The pain in my right arm, the pain in my left leg

They were nothing compared to this other pain.

I was flimsy.

I was feeble.

I was utterly powerless.

"Big Brother Koyomi…"

The snake gone

Sengoku approached Kanbaru and me with faltering steps, having regained consciousness. The boundary was pointless now that the aberration had departed and the scale markings eating into her flesh had vanished from every inch of her skin visible on her swimsuit-clad body.

Not half-gone.

Fully gone.

Her skin was fair, smooth, beautiful.

She wasn't suffering anymore.

She wasn't hurting anymore.

She wasn't going to have to cry anymore□

"Big Brother Koyomi. Thank you for saving me."

Stop it.

Sengoku.

Please…don't mouth words like "thank you" that I can't bear to hear. I don't have any right to be thanked by you. Because of all things□I was trying to save even the person who cursed you.

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

I was roused awake the next day as usual by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi and began getting ready to go to school. Tuesday, June thirteenth, a weekday. My right arm and my left leg seemed to have healed to the point where everyday tasks didn't pose an issue. With Kanbaru and Sengoku supporting me on both sides, pathetically enough, I had gone to the abandoned cram school afterwards to have Shinobu drink a bit of my blood so as to bolster my body's healing capabilities. However hands-off my parents, I couldn't come home with a crushed arm and foot. As ever, Shinobu didn't speak to me. Perhaps she was appalled, perhaps she wasn't thinking anything at all. Either way, she couldn't have minded a surprise opportunity to drink even more of my blood and must have been in one of her better moods. As a matter of proper procedure I did give a simple report of the events to Oshino, but he didn't say much either. Perhaps he was appalled□perhaps he wasn't thinking anything at all.

After that, I spent the night with everyone in one of the abandoned cram school's rooms. Sengoku had lied to her parents and said she was at a friend's sleepover party, so she had to be somewhere that night. With no other suitable locations available to us, we slept right there in the ruins. We were excited at first like kids on a school trip, but all three of us must have been tired and fell asleep in no time.

If it's winter, then spring isn't far behind.

Night is always followed by day.

Kanbaru and I walked Sengoku home, promised to meet again, then parted ways. After putting together some plans for Senjogahara's birthday party for a bit, I split up with Kanbaru too at a crosswalk. Then, once I finally got home and got to work falling back asleep in my own bed, I was roused awake by my little sisters. For no real reason, I asked Tsukihi, "Do you remember Sengoku?"

She replied saying she did.

Oh, you mean Sen?

When I heard that, I remembered just as she'd called me Big Brother Koyomi, I'd called her Sen.

Even so

I couldn't call her that now.

Changing into my school uniform, I began to think.

About why there had been two Jagirinawa.

Why two snakes had possessed Sengoku.

There was that girl, her friend, with her misbegotten grudge she resented how the boy she fancied confessed to Sengoku only to get turned down. The girl turned to occult charms, a fad at her school, and to a top-drawer curse at that. It was her way of venting steam, and she must not have thought that it would actually work…

That incident alone offered up one more person another character who might have resented Sengoku. Yes, the boy whom Sengoku had given the cold shoulder. As with Sengoku's friend, I didn't know his name but it wouldn't be shocking if he, too, held a misbegotten grudge against her. You could even call it reasonable, psychologically speaking. A simple case of romantic entanglements. Of being head over heels. The girls didn't have an exclusive patent on those charms that were a

fad at their school. It was entirely possible for someone to attempt a curse without informing the target like an honest fool. Placing a curse in earnest□also a possibility.

When one is cursed, two holes are dug.

Well, that's all just my conjecture. I don't have any firm evidence, and even if I'm right, who the Jagirinawa went back to, the girl or the boy, and how a returned curse works is something I can't hope to figure out.

Sengoku doesn't need to know, either.

However you look at it, that would be shoes on a snake.